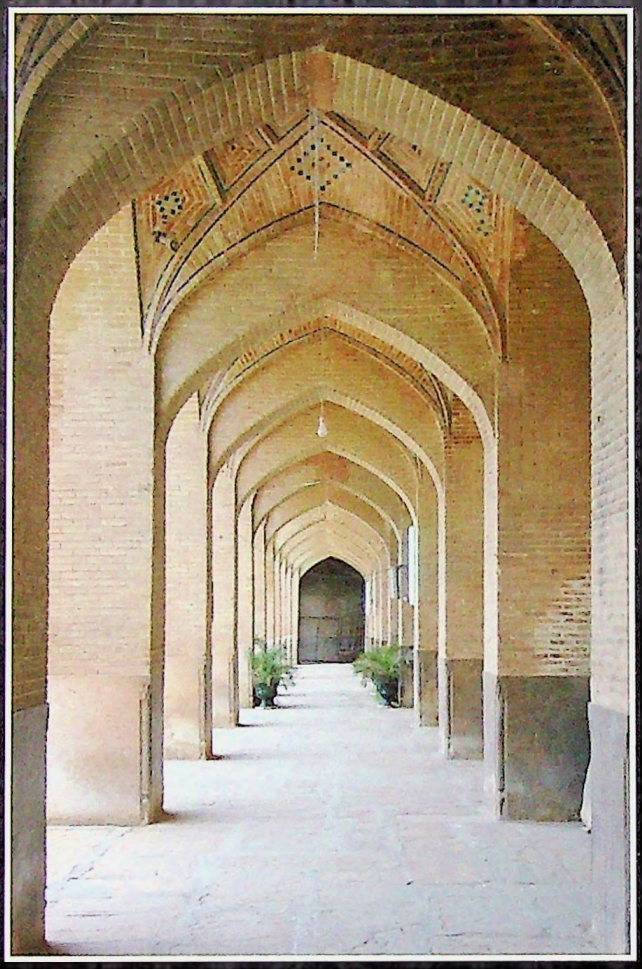
GOD REVISITED

Issues of Belief & Identity in the 21st Century



NASIM BUTT

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Is there a God? How can we know the answer? If God exists, what can we know about God? These questions are central to the philosophy of religion, but are of concern to all thinking people. In *God Revisited*, Nasim Butt tackles these issues, looking at the classical arguments for the existence of God and examining the contemporary challenges to them from sociologists and psychologists as well as philosophers.

The author also examines the nature and meaning of individuals' religious experiences, and the relation between personal faith and religious pluralism. As a Muslim, Dr Butt evaluates alternative viewpoints on the above issues in terms both of their general validity and (mindful of the need for Muslims to gain a stronger appreciation of the logical basis of religious faith) with reference to an Islamic worldview. All philosophical writing reflects the author's own commitments. Hence completely neutrality is not possible; but that does not preclude a genuine striving for critical honesty. This breadth of viewpoint combined with intellectual insight makes *God Revisited* a valuable source for readers of all faiths.

Born in 1961 in Pakistan, Dr Nasim Butt was raised in England. He holds a B.Sc., M.Sc. and Ph.D. in the history of science from the University of London, as well as an M.B.A in educational management and the National Professional Qualification for Leadership. Formerly Principal of Brondesbury Boys' College in Northwest London, Dr Butt is a qualified Ofsted inspector who assesses both state and public schools. His specialized interests include the philosophy of science and of religion.

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Preface

Is there a God? How can we know? What can we know about God? These questions are the focal point of the philosophy of religion. In this book, I will wrestle with these issues, looking at the classical arguments for God's existence and examining the contemporary challenges to theism from sociology, psychology and philosophy. I will then go on to investigate the meaning and significance of personal religious experience, revelation and miracles, and assess how religious pluralism relates to individual commitment.

In this book alternative viewpoints are evaluated not only with regard to their general strength, but also with regard to their value in the construction of an Islamic, or Muslim worldview. Thus, the implications that Muslim convictions might have for the philosophical issues are discussed. It is crucial, in my judgement, that Muslims attain a greater degree of philosophical awareness in order to improve the quality of general scholarship and a sounder basis for understanding their faith.

I am confident that this book will be of value to readers of other faiths as well; indeed, the issues discussed should concern all thoughtful persons. The assumption that underlies this hope is that complete neutrality in philosophy is neither possible nor desirable. Philosophical work always reflects a person's deepest commitments. Such commitments, however, do not preclude a genuine striving for critical honesty. My hope, God willing, is that this book will make a contribution to that end.

Nasim Butt

1. *The Qur'an*, Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation, 59:42

Chapter 1
Philosphy of Religion in Context

"And the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time"
(T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets")

Religion is an important force in human life and human history. This remains the case despite periodic announcements by "secularist" thinkers that humanity has finally come of age and has now no more use for religion. Most human beings at the beginning of the twenty-first century are still vitally concerned with such questions as "Is there a God?" "Why does God allow suffering?" and "What happens to a person at death?" These and other questions posed by the great religions of the world are grounded in some of the deepest human hopes and fears.

The philosophy of religion can perhaps be best defined in a preliminary way as the attempt to think hard and deeply about such fundamental questions as these. In saying that philosophy of religion focuses on these *questions*, I mean, of course, to say that the *answers* given by religions are also to be the object of attention. Philosophy of religion is therefore critical reflection on religious beliefs.

To explain why the focus of philosophy of religion is on religious beliefs, it would be helpful to say a little more about both philosophy and religion. Philosophy and religion are sometimes viewed as rivals, and the relations between them have not always been cordial. Some of the reasons for this mutual suspicion will become clear as we proceed. The questions "What is philosophy?" and "What is religion?" are, of course, enormously difficult. Such complex human activities can obviously be defined in many different ways. Indeed, it is possible to define "philosophy" and "religion" in such a way that they become mutually exclusive rivals.

Religious believers have sometimes seen philosophers as unsympathetic critics who try to undermine religious faith. To the believer a philosopher may appear as a presumptuous champion of human reason who rejects divine wisdom. Conversely, the philosopher has sometimes seen the religious believer as a benighted defender of superstition and blind obedience to authority.

While these kinds of conflicts have certainly occurred, and though tensions between philosophy and religion remain, it would be a great mistake to embody such oppositions in the very definitions of "philosophy" and "religion". Conflict is not - in my judgement - inevitable. Some of the greatest philosophers have been religious believers, and some of the greatest contributions to religious thought have come from philosophers. The question of whether religion is reasonable, or whether it should even try to be, is among the questions which philosophy of religion aims to answer. Such inquiries should not be settled in a peremptory fashion by the way we define our terms.

Religion is a complicated and rich human phenomenon, and as such it is studied by academicians from many disciplines: historians, psychologists, sociologists and theologians, to name a few. Religion touches on the whole of human existence. A practising adherent of a particular religion has not only certain characteristic beliefs but also characteristic emotions, attitudes and experiences. The believer usually associates with other believers in a community that may be relatively loose or extraordinarily tight-knit. The believer usually acts differently from the non-believer. He or she engages in worship and other religious activities. He or she may attempt to follow a set of rules or principles throughout life, or may take as a role model the life of the founder of the religion or recipient of divine revelation.

Religion, then, can by no means be reduced to a purely intellectual phenomenon. A religion is not simply a set of beliefs or dogmas. However, most religions at least include beliefs. A religious person does not merely have different feelings or attitudes. Such persons think differently about themselves and their world. They worship as part of a community, and that community is defined in part by its beliefs.

We will say more later about philosophy, but philosophy has always been understood as a search for wisdom or knowledge. The philosopher is a seeker of truth, and it is therefore natural for this "belief' element of religion to catch the eye of the philosopher. The philosopher wants to know whether religious beliefs are true and whether they can be known to be true or reasonably believed to be true. In considering these religious beliefs, of course, the philosopher ought not to wrench them out of context, but to see them in relation to other elements of religious life. (Philosophers have not always followed this rule). The philosopher's main interest, however, will be such religious beliefs as "God created the world" and "Human beings are destined for eternal life."

This focus on the truth and reasonableness of religious belief helps distinguish the philosophy of religion from other academic disciplines that study religion. While the historian or sociologist may also study religious beliefs, his focus is not specifically on the truth or reasonableness of such beliefs. False beliefs may be as important as true ones to the historian or sociologist who tries to paint a picture of the history or a religion or the place of religion in society.

The distinction between the philosopher of religion and the theologian is trickier. Theology is an activity carried on within religion (at least in theory). Thus the theologian looks at religious beliefs from within, as an adherent or representative of a religious tradition. Philosophy of religion, on the other hand, as critical reflection on religious questions and beliefs, may be engaged in by thinkers who are not themselves religious at all, as well as by committed religious thinkers. We will shortly deal with the question as to whether this critical reflection can or should be done from a neutral perspective.

In addition to distinguishing the philosophy of religion from theology and from the empirical disciplines that study religion as "factual" (history, psychology and sociology), it is important to distinguish the philosophy of religion from religious philosophies. To draw this distinction, a little more must be said about philosophy in general. It is often pointed out by philosophers that the question "What is philosophy?" is itself part of philosophy. Philosophers do not agree among themselves about what philoso-

phy is. Hence it is probably impossible to give a completely neutral definition of philosophy, a definition which does not itself presuppose some philosophical commitments.

Some philosophers attempt to get around the obvious substantive disagreements among philosophers by specifying some supposedly neutral method of answering the questions of philosophy. This method can then be assumed as the common ground in terms of which philosophy can be defined. Unfortunately, however, there is almost as much disagreement about the proper method for philosophy as about the conclusions of philosophy. Rationalists propose that philosophy should employ a method of deductive proof, linguistic philosophers think philosophy should consist of the analysis of language, and phenomenologists think that philosophy should concern itself with the description of "lived" experience. None of these methods really appears to be purely neutral either, because when unpacked they invariably presuppose a particular view of reason or language or experience.

Perhaps a beginning can be made by noting what we have already claimed and what all the different schools of philosophy seem to admit: philosophy is a rational enterprise. Whatever else it may be, philosophy is a reflective activity; philosophy is a kind of thinking. Of course, not every kind of thinking will quality as philosophical. No one would dignity my thinking about what kind of soap to use with the label "philosophy." The thinking we call philosophy is an unusually serious kind of thinking, directed to especially serious kinds of problems.

Certain kinds of questions seem to be asked by almost all human beings who have reached a certain level of reflectiveness. Who am I? What kind of a world do I live in? What is worth living for? These fundamental questions have a universal significance, and they properly inspire the deepest and most rigorous kind of thinking. Answers to them, especially when those answers are comprehensive and organised, are called philosophies. And the activity of seriously wrestling with these questions is called philosophy.

Religious philosophy, then, is philosophical thinking that is religious in inspiration or direction. In this sense it is not identical

with the philosophy of religion. As a form of reflection, philosophy is always self-conscious and critical. The philosopher not only builds systems of thought; he critically reflects on those systems. It is this critical and reflective side of philosophy that is most evident in the philosophy of religion.

In differentiating philosophy of religion from theology and religious philosophy I have described it as a reflective activity that requires a certain critical distance from its subject. In comparison with theology and religious philosophy, the philosophy of religion appears to aim for a neutral stance. But is such neutrality with respect to religious matters really possible? Some religious thinkers have denied that it is, claiming, for example, that a human being cannot be neutral with respect to God. The person who is not properly submissive to God is, they claim, a rebel. "He who is not for us is against us."

Even more radically, one might ask whether such neutrality is desirable. Is it not possible that those who attempt to adopt a neutral, disinterested posture cut themselves off from the possibility of even understanding what religion is all about?

Posing these questions puts us right into the heart of a central question in the philosophy of religion and theology, the problem of the relation of faith to reason. One's view of faith and reason largely determines whether one sees philosophy and religion as inevitably hostile to each other, as coexisting peacefully but independently, or as possible allies It is necessary for two reasons to say something about this issue at the very outset of a book such as this.

First, some religious believers hold a view of faith and reason, which claims that rational reflection on religion is impossible, useless or even harmful. In effect, they call into question the very legitimacy of philosophy of religion Hence some consideration of their view is in order if we are to be truly reflective and critical. Second, it seems only fair to try to become clear, and to help the reader become clear about the standpoint taken by this book. What kind of thinking about religion is going on in these pages?

I shall approach this issue first by sketching two opposing viewpoints, *fideism* and *neutralism.* These I will criticise and reject. I will then propose an alternative that will, I hope, preserve the

strengths and eliminate the weaknesses of the initial theories. This constructive proposal will be termed *critical dialogue*.

Fidelism

Many theologians have claimed that human beings are inherently religious. If they do not worship the true God, then they worship false gods – themselves, or things of their own making. On this view a human being is never religiously neutral; he is always either a faithful servant or a rebel against the Creator. The faithful servant functions as he was meant to function and fulfils his created destiny The rebel, however, is always "going against the grain" in rebelling against his true nature. All his activities reflect the distorted and twisted character he has given to life.

Some have concluded from this that the thinking of the unbeliever is also twisted and distorted, either in all areas or at least with respect to essential moral and religious truth. Although the reasoning of rebellious humans makes a pretence of neutrality, this neutrality is in fact an illusion. Indeed the very attempt of humans to think about God "for themselves", independently and autonomously, is proof of their rebelliousness. It represents an attempt on the part of man to put his own thought and reason above God.

This view implies that human attempts to reflect on the truth of religious beliefs are disastrous. It is impossible for the unbeliever as' an unbeliever to reflect on the reasonableness of religious belief and thereby become a believer. Rather, the unbeliever's only hope is first to believe and then perhaps come to see the reasonableness of the belief. If God in His mercy reveals to the unbeliever the truth about Himself and the unbeliever, the unbeliever must humbly accept this truth. God must "force an entry". The unbeliever's twisted thinking can only be straightened out as his status and life change from that of rebel to servant. Only the regenerative mind can see the truth. '

This view implies that one cannot arrive at true religious belief as a result of rational reflection. The starting place for any correct thinking about religion is rather a genuine faith, a personal com-

mitment. Fideism claims that faith is the precondition for any correct thinking about religion.

Fideism puts its critics in an awkward spot, for all criticism of the view can easily be written off as the product of unbelief. It thus gains an invulnerable status against all attacks. But it gains this status at a rather high cost; the fideist cannot attempt to win over his critics by rational argument or even attempt to engage in rational dialogue with those who disagree. The presupposition of such dialogue and argument is the possibility of common ground, some point of agreement which can be reflected on or appealed to, but it is just this kind of common ground which the fideist denies.

The attitude of the fideist resembles in an interesting way the attitude of some orthodox Marxists, who dismiss the criticisms of Marxism made by non-Marxist economists, political scientists and philosophers. The Marxist reasons that these people are committed to the economic status quo and that their criticisms are therefore merely an ideological smoke screen that hides economic self-interest. If a Marxist holds to this position universally in a rigid *a priori* manner, he eliminates any true dialogue between Marxists and non- Marxists. The orthodox Marxist loses the benefit of criticism which might enable him to improve his theories. He shuts himself up in a sterile "world of the committed" and thereby loses the chance to show non-Marxists that Marxism really does provide a superior framework for interpreting political and economic events. In the long run his party-line theories do not develop, and eventually they are accepted only by those who know no alternatives.

In an analogous way the fideist also encloses himself within "the world of the committed", and in a similar manner he eliminates the possibility of showing the non-believer the superiority of a religious world view. But Fideism faces an even more serious problem: Where should one place one's faith? To what should one be committed?

In effect the, fideist says, "Commit yourself and you will see that what I say is true." The problem is that many people say that, asking for commitment to *many* different things. One can commitment to creeds, books, mosques or popes. Religious sects,

political ideologies (like Marxism), psychological cults and established religions all make their appeals.

The Muslim fideist may, of course, respond that there is an important difference between his commitments and those of all other faiths. He holds to the *true* set of beliefs, the *right* presuppositions. He can see the truth because he has been divinely guided; he has undergone a genuine spiritual experience regenerating his inner being. Of course, these claims may be correct – but how does one know them to be correct? Adherents of other religions can easily make similar claims.

It seems to me that in a pluralistic culture, it is almost impossible not to reflect critically on where one should place one's trust. And even if it is possible to make a commitment apart from critical reflection, the existence of even one September 11th horror would make it clear that it is irresponsible not to exercise critical judgement when asked for commitment. To the sincere individual who really wants truth, the fideist offers no help; he offers only another voice crying out in the middle of the proverbial religious babble.

Perhaps the mistake of the fideist is to overestimate dogmatically the impact of unbelief. For the moment let us concede that most human beings are rebels against God. Let us further concede that this status impairs their personality in all its functions, including their reasoning. From this it follows only that it may be difficult for human beings in this condition to think rightly about God. Their thinking may be harmed and limited in all kinds of ways, but it does not necessarily follow that such thinking is useless. After all, God remains God, the Creator, and He may well establish limits to the ways in which even a rebellious creature may run amok in his thinking. So at the very least, it seems wrongheaded to conclude at the outset that human thinking about God is worthless.

But what about the charge of the fideist that critical thinking about religious belief is impious or presumptuous, an arrogant placing of human reason above God? It would seem that whether critical reflection about religious questions is presumptuous depends chiefly on two factors. The first is whether God wants humans to reflect about religious truth. If God had forbidden human beings to think critically about religious questions, then

perhaps it would be impious to do so, provided one had some way of knowing about the prohibition. But I see absolutely no reason to think that God wishes human beings to suppress their critical faculties. After all, our ability to think is a gift from God, and it seems proper to assume that this gift, like others God has bestowed, is intended to be used, provided that it is used properly. And it would certainly appear to be a proper use of reason, when confronted by a plurality of completing truth-claims, to reflect on matters as important as religious belief.

The second factor that would affect whether critical thinking about religion is legitimate is the manner in which the thinking is carried on. Clearly it is possible to think about God in an arrogant or presumptuous manner. No doubt much actual human thinking about God is of this character. But this is surely a temptation to combat, not a necessary feature of critical thought about religion. A person who sincerely wants to know whether God is real; who is willing to recognise his own inferior status in relation to God; who recognises the fallibility and possible bias of his own thinking; who understands that it is unlikely that he will be able to gain a fully adequate understanding of God; who is open to the possibility that his thinking may have to be aided by God to be successful; and who thereby does not rule out the possibility of a revelation - such a person's thinking about God would hardly appear to be impious or presumptuous.

> "*No vision can grasp Him (God),*
> *But His grasp is over all vision:*
> *He is above all comprehension,*
> *Yet is acquainted with all things*"[1]

Neutralism

At the opposite pole to the Fideist is the philosopher who insists that our thinking about religious matters must be presuppositionless. The neutralist believes that our critical thinking will

1. *The Qur'an*, Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation, 56:103.

only be likely to help us toward the truth if it is completely impartial and unbiased. Thus to think rightly about religious matters we must put aside all our commitments, or at least those commitments which are religiously "loaded", and adopt a completely neutral stance.

The neutralist in effect claims that to be reasonable is to think without making any "risky" assumptions. Two sorts of questions must be asked about this. First, if the neutralist is right, is it possible to think reasonably? *Can* human beings think in a purely neutral, disinterested manner? Second, is the neutralist right? Does reason require that one jettison all prior commitments and assumptions?

With regard to the first type of question, it is painfully obvious that human thinking is very much affected by all sorts of non-rational factors. Our thought is coloured not only by our prior experiences but also by our emotions, our upbringing and education, the ideas and attitudes of our friends, our historical situation, and a host of other factors. It is true that by reflection we can become conscious of some of these factors and negate or reduce their influence. But it seems unlikely that a person could ever do this completely. Indeed, it would seem foolish and unreasonable for a person to believe he has done this, for such a self-satisfied attitude would harm his chances of uncovering other non-rational influences. I conclude that the proposal of the neutralist cannot be accepted as a condition or requirement of rational thought. It can be at most an ideal which one should strive to approximate. One could ask, however, is neutralism even valid as an ideal? Is the neutralist right to insist that rational thought be presuppositionless? A full treatment of this question would require a detailed discussion of the central issues in the theory of knowledge.[1] Such an excursion into epistemology is hardly possible here, but it is necessary to say something about these questions, even if what is said is very sketchy.

A long and venerable philosophical tradition holds that genuine knowledge must consist of truths that are known with abso-

1. A good introduction to the theory of knowledge is David Wolfe's *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*; Inter Varsity Press, 1982

lute certainty. We shall term this view *foundationalism*, using the term in a "strong" sense.[1] To know something, one must have a conclusive reason to think it is true. But of course one must also know that the reason is a good one, and therefore one must know it to be true, which may require a reason for one's reason. This threatens to become an infinite regress unless one knows some things directly or immediately, things that therefore can be said to be basic or foundational to knowledge. If this foundational knowledge is not really known but is merely believed or assumed, then the whole structure of knowledge becomes insecure. For this reason, the foundationalist insists that this basic knowledge must be certain. Any proposal to begin with unjustified or unproven assumptions, as the fideist recommends, is disastrous. Only what can be recognised to be true with certainty by a purely objective thinker will do.

We have already discussed whether such thinking is really possible. We are now asking whether it is desirable. Perhaps one way of getting a handle on this question is to see how well the foundationalist ideal accurately describes the work of natural scientists. Most people would agree that in the natural sciences people are working toward knowledge in a rational manner. However, many philosophers of science would today question whether scientists follow the foundationalist ideal.

It has always been evident that scientists make some assumptions that do not seem unquestionable and that cannot really be proven to be true. They assume that nature is basically intelligible and orderly. A uniformity of natural processes and of experience is also assumed as a basis for making generalisations. However, in addition to these very general assumptions, it seems quite plausible to claim that science only progresses if more specific kinds of commitment are made. T.S. Kuhn, in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, has called attention to the way "normal sci-

1. In addition to "strong" foundationalism, there is also a "weak" foundationalism, which claims that some of our knowledge is properly basic or foundational to the rest, but does not claim that this foundational knowledge is known with absolute certainty. Rather our basic knowledge is seen as fallible, subject to correction and revision. Weak foundationalism is consistent with the approach taken in this book

ence" depends on what he terms a *paradigm*, which is a basic set of assumptions embodied in the practices of a scientific community.[1] Kuhn argues convincingly that the acceptance of such a paradigm is not simply a matter of "checking by the facts", as the foundationalist might wish to claim, since the basic paradigm beliefs have at least some bearing on what is to count as a fact and how the facts are to be described. As some interpret him, Kuhn goes on to make the extreme and questionable claim that the adoption of a paradigm is a non-rational matter governed by sociological factors. Even if one does not accept this extreme claim, Kuhn's work still implies that science, far from precluding less than certain commitments, actually depends on such commitments.

The history of philosophy also provides an interesting way of testing the claims of the foundationalist. Perhaps the philosopher who most rigorously attempted to follow the foundationalist programme was the Frenchman René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes attempted to realise the ideal of pure objectivity by methodologically subjecting all his beliefs to doubt. By supposing that all his experiences might be dream experiences and that it was possible that he was constantly being deceived by an evil being of great power, Descartes rejected almost all his previous beliefs as uncertain. All that remained was the certain truth of his own existence, which he affirmed to be undoubtable as long as he was conscious.

With this slender foundation of, "I think, therefore I am," Descartes attempted to prove the existence of God, the external world and his own immaterial soul. However, almost no one today finds Descartes' arguments convincing. It seems evident, rather, that David Hume, a Scottish philosopher of the eighteenth Century) was correct in asserting that Cartesian doubt would be incurable if attainable.[2] Rather than laying a foundation for knowledge, Descartes' doubt seems a sure road to total scepticism.

1. Kuhn, T .S. (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2. Hume, D. (1977), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publications.]

Critical Dialogue

What option remains? We have rejected both fideism and neutralism – the former because it precludes rational reflection, the latter because it places impossible demands on rational reflection. But there is something correct about both these viewpoints. It can be seen from our criticism of neutralism that the fideist has a valid point when he stresses the way our thought is conditioned by basic assumptions and attitudes. And surely the neutralist has a point against the fideist in stressing the value of honest, no-holds-barred, critical reflection on our commitments. How then can reason and commitment be combined?

Perhaps the two can be brought into a happy if sometimes tension-filled alliance by rethinking what it means to be reasonable. Instead of seeing reason as presuppositionless thinking, suppose we view reason as a *willingness to test one's commitments*. Perhaps the fideist is right in claiming that it is impossible to begin without commitments; perhaps it is not even desirable. But it is a mistake to claim that commitments, even fundamental ones, are impervious to criticism and modification. Perhaps the neutralist is right in urging us to strive to evaluate our commitments rationally, to reflect on them critically and honestly in the light of evidence and argument. But it is a mistake to think that this process of testing can or should proceed from a totally neutral standpoint, the standpoint of a person without any convictions. Although any belief can in principle be doubted, we cannot doubt all our beliefs at once without undermining the possibility of overcoming the doubt.

How does one go about testing one's beliefs? Simple beliefs about particular matters of fact are subject to fairly direct experiential tests. More general and comprehensive scientific theories can only be tested indirectly. One looks for theoretical coherence, predictive power, the ability to illuminate what was previously unintelligible. Usually a theory must be tested in relation to to its rivals. A scientific theory that explains a great deal will be accepted even if it faces serious objections, as long as there is no viable alternative. Sometimes the decision to continue to accept a theory requires one to discount or reinterpret what purport to be facts; at other times it seems more reasonable to accept the fact and reject

or modify the theory. In short, the testing of theories is a complicated affair, requiring an element of good judgement as well as honesty and concern for truth. One assumes that experience is not infinitely elastic: some theories fit the facts better than others. But the process of testing is not one for which formal rules can be given.

The testing of basic religious beliefs seems to me to be basically a similar matter, although the range of experiences that is relevant as evidence As far broader. The testing of religious beliefs is, of course, likely to be even more difficult than the testing of scientific theories. The reasons for this are many, but they include the point with which the fideist begins. Few, if any, people are indifferent to religious matters. Since religion bears on a person's life in a far more direct and personal way than science, one can expect it to be correspondingly more difficult to reach agreement on religious matters. Common ground may be hard to find, and rational discussion may sooner or later reach an impasse where both sides say, "This is how it appears to me."

But though common ground may be difficult to find (or even impossible, as the fideist claims), that is no reason not to *look*. Each person is an individual and no doubt must make a final judgement about "the way things appear to him". But to the extent that one individual has made an effort to engage others in critical dialogue, he is entitled to regard his commitments as no longer mere prejudices but as convictions that have withstood a process of critical testing and are so far reasonable. In the process of critical dialogue, the individual attempts to think through the alternatives and the objections to his own view, which those alternatives put forward. In the course of such a process, a person's views may be modified or abandoned. What survives is not merely prejudice or bias but, subject to a continued willingness to test what appears doubtful, reasoned conviction.

Such a process cannot, of course, be guaranteed to work successfully. Finite, fallible human beings cannot survey all the alternatives or assess those they do examine with total accuracy. And the process of reflection cannot be extended indefinitely. The purpose of our religious beliefs is ultimately to guide our lives. If a

person spent all his time critically reflecting on his beliefs, there would be no point in having any in the first place.

> *"So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the faith: (Establish) God's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: No change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by God: that is the standard Religion: But most among mankind under - stand not."*[1]

Philosophy of religion, I believe, is best viewed as a process of critical dialogue. Obviously each participant in the dialogue approaches it from his own unique perspective. This means that even his critical reflections about his faith are shaped somewhat by his attitudes, basic convictions and previous experiences. In short, people participate as whole persons, not calculating machines. But the honest participant does not shrink from self-consciously examining any part of what he brings to the encounter. No commitments can be taken off the table as not subject to discussion. And although it may not be possible to be neutral, it is possible for the participants in the dialogue to be honest with themselves and others. This honesty requires a willingness to see if the evidence really is best interpreted and explained according to one's own theory.

Such a critical dialogue is risky. Probably everyone has heard a story of a student, brought up in a strict religious environment, who loses his faith as a result of the critical challenges hurled at him at a college or university. However, there is something unhealthy and even dishonest about a faith that hides from such a challenge. Can one really believe in God wholeheartedly and at the same time assert that one can only continue to believe by refusing to consider the evidence – against one's belief? Such a "belief' seems perilously close to a half-conscious conviction that in fact God may not be real, combined with a wish to hide this truth from oneself. (I must stress, however, that a decision to ignore evidence must not be confused with an honest recognition of one's inability to evaluate evidence properly. It might be entirely proper for an uneducated person to refuse to consider compli-

1. The Qur'an, Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation, 30:30.

cated abstract arguments that would only confuse and bewilder him.)

A genuine and robust faith will not shrink from the process of testing, for it is confident that it will indeed pass the test. If I genuinely believe that God is real, I will not be afraid to examine alternative views and listen to problems and objections raised by others. Through this process, I am confident that my faith will be deepened and strengthened. Furthermore, by listening to my opponent and by looking for common ground on which to show him the superiority of my belief, I gain the possibility of making my opponent into a friend and ally. Instead of churlishly telling those who have other views that they must begin by accepting my presuppositions - an action that is probably not possible even if it is desirable, since belief is not usually under voluntary control - I attempt to find ground on which we are both comfortable. The process may be difficult, and with some it is doubtless impossible. I must not allow my opponent to lure me over the cliff into the thin air of neutralism, where no living human being can stand. However, the search for common ground is worth making.

In the chapters that follow, we shall look at the dialogue as it has gone on in the philosophy of religion over a number of issues (issues of belief and identity, as the title of the book indicates). For instance:

- Arguments for and against the kind of God believed in by Muslims, Jews and Christians;
- How religious experience is best analysed and what we can conclude from it;
- Whether a person could ever be justified in accepting some person, book or creed as having special authority;
- Whether miracles are possible and under what conditions one might believe in their occurrence;
- How religious language, especially talk about God, can best be understood;
- Further analysis of the issue discussed in this chapter - that of personal commitment and intellectual honesty in a religiously pluralistic world.

Most of the examples I take will be from the Islamic worldview. This does not mean, however, that the book will be of more interest to Muslims and people seriously interested in Islam than to those of other faiths. It is my contention that as an introduction to critical dialogue about faith, it is better to focus on the faith one understands best. For me, of course, that is Islam. I hope, however, that the broad but analytical approach adopted in the book will be of value to those of any faith, as well as to those who lack faith in any traditionally religious sense of the term.

Chapter 2
Concepts of God

"Allah! There is no god but He, – the Living, the Self-Subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and the earth. Who is there can inter - cede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He wil - leth. His throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme (in glory)."

The Qur'an 2:255

A belief in God or gods of some kind is central to the great majority of the world's religions. Obviously, then, two key questions for the philosophy of religion are whether it is reasonable to believe in a God and, if so, what kind of a God should be believed in.

Although there are a great number of views about God that vary tremendously in the details, most views about God can be seen as falling into one of a relatively small number of types. *Polytheism*, the belief that there exists a plurality of personal gods, is common among primitive peoples and is clearly present in Greek and Nordic mythology. *Henotheism* also recognises a plurality of gods but the henotheist restricts his allegiance to one god, either because he sees that god in some way as superior to the others or simply because that god is the god of his own tribe or people. *Monotheism*, often simply abbreviated as *theism*, holds that only one God exists. God is seen as a personal being, supreme in power, knowledge and worth, who created all other existing beings out of nothing:

> *"He is the Creator out of nothing, the Fashioner, the Designer: His are the most beautiful names. Everything in the heavens and on earth glorifies Him; and He is the Mighty, the Wise."*[1]

Pantheism, often associated with Hinduism and other eastern religions but not uncommon in the West, holds that it is not ultimately proper to think of God as a personal being or as a being of any kind. Such concepts are too limiting for God, who must ultimately be understood as identical with nature or the universe as a whole. *Panentheism* says that God is not identical with the universe but must be seen as including the universe. The universe is in some sense God, but God is more than the universe.

These are the major views about God that are found in the religions of the world. There are, of course, many interesting variations on each view, some of which are significant enough to warrant a name. Thus *dualism* can be seen as a variation on polytheism, the dualist holding to a plurality of only two gods who are opposed to each other. (Usually one god is seen as good and the other as evil). *Deism*, in one of its senses, can be understood as a variation on theism. The deist believes in one God, like the theist, but believes that this God cannot or does not involve himself in his creation. *Absolute monism* can be seen as a variation on pantheism or panentheism. The absolute monist holds that God is an absolute unity that is somehow manifested in a less-than-fully-real world of apparent plurality.

The list of views about God also includes views that reject any kind of a god. *Agnosticism* holds that the truth about God cannot be or is not known and that people should therefore suspend judgement on the question. *Atheism* goes further and actually denies the existence of God. *Naturalism* is simply atheism expressed positively. The atheist does not believe in a god behind nature; he simply believes that the natural order of things exists "on its own". While atheism is a belief held by many anti-religious people, it is also sometimes held by religious people. The Theravada variety of Buddhism appears to embrace atheism and

1. *The Qur'an*, Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation, 59:42

some atheists have attempted to put forward a humanistic "religion of man" which would not involve belief in a God of any kind.

The Theistic Concept of God

Of all the various views of God, monotheism (henceforth theism for short) holds a special importance. It is the dominant view of God in three of the world's great religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Views of God that seem to approximate theism are also found among a significant number of Hindus and Buddhists, and traces or suggestions of such a view can be found in the writings of some of the great philosophers of ancient Greece and in many other religions as well. The reasonableness of theism seems therefore to be an issue well worth considering. Before attempting this, however, we need to say a little more about what a theistic concept of God involves.

In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition there has emerged a reasonably well-defined list of characteristics that are seen as essential to God. Some of the elements on the list are more central than others and a person rejecting one or more of them might still be recognised as holding to theism or a variation on it. But there is a good deal of agreement about what God is supposed to be like. God, whatever else He may be, is supposed to be worthy of worship, the supreme object of religious devotion. Indeed, this is a central requirement of the theistic concept of God.

> *"Is it not to Allah that sincere devotion is due? ... Say: Verily, I am commanded to serve Allah with sincere devotion."*[1]

It would appear to be a minimal requirement for a being worthy of worship that he be greater than any other being. No other being exceeds God in power, knowledge or goodness. But this requirement is indeed minimal, since theists usually hold that God is not only greater than any other being as a matter of fact but also

1. *The Qur'an*, Abdullah Yusuf Ali Translation, 39:3-11.

that it is impossible that there should ever be a being greater than God. God's power, knowledge and goodness are therefore seen not merely as very great but as maximal. God is *omnipotent*: He possesses all the power a being can have. God is *omniscient*: He knows everything possible for a being to know. God is *morally perfect*: His goodness is unsurpassable (see quote from Qur'an with which this chapter begins 2:255).

Another way of expressing God's greatness is to say that He is infinite, or unlimited. These terms must, however, be understood in a qualified sense. To say that God is infinite in power does not mean that He can literally do anything. It has usually been held, for example, that God cannot create a square circle or a person with a morally free will, who is determined always to choose what is morally right. The reason for this is not that God lacks some power or ability He might have had, but that these conceptions are logically contradictory and therefore impossible or even meaningless. God's power is the power to do anything that is logically possible. In addition, most theists hold that there are certain things God cannot do because of His nature. Being morally perfect, He cannot commit an act of senseless cruelty, for example. God's omnipotence must then be understood as the power to do whatever is logically possible and consistent with God's own essential characteristics. Similar restrictions may have to be placed on the concept of omniscience.

Even with these qualifications, God's power is still infinite in the sense of being unlimited by anything outside Himself. God is in no way limited by any other being. It is for this reason that God is described as a *necessary* being. God does not just happen to exist. Since nothing can threaten His existence, His non-existence is not really possible. Theists have understood this necessity in two ways. Some have held that God's existence is logically necessary. On this view, "God does not exist" is actually self-contradictory, though it is admitted that the contradiction is not an obvious one. Others have held that God's necessity is simply grounded in His power and independence. Nothing can in fact threaten God's existence, so His existence is factually necessary even if His non-existence is logically possible. Another way of putting this is to say that God is

self-existent, meaning literally that His existence depends on nothing outside Himself.

Since God is a necessary being, He *is* not just "another being". He is in some sense a being, however, on the traditional theistic account; not only that, but He is a being of a certain type with a particular nature. God is not just "being itself"; such descriptions fail to do justice to the *personal* character of God. That God is personal is implicit in what has already been said, because only a personal being can have power, knowledge and moral perfection. To have power is to be able to do things, to act in certain ways. To know things a being must be intelligent and possess sentience. To be morally perfect is to be perfect in deeds, intentions and thoughts.

Since God is personal, it is appropriate to understand him as *acting*. God's primary action is usually understood as that of creation. That God is the *Creator* means that whatever exists at any moment exists because of God's will and creative power. Everything that exists other than God depends on God for its existence, a relationship that is properly stated by describing God as Creator and all other things as creatures.

As Creator, God is therefore continuously active in His creation. (The denial of this is a reversion to deism). This is not to deny a certain autonomy and integrity to the created order, but it does imply that whatever occurs does so because God wills it or permits it to occur. God is everywhere present within His creation in the sense that He can and does bring about events immediately, and He knows what occurs everywhere in the same immediate manner. Therefore it is a mistake to think of God as limited to one region of space. He is properly thought of as *omnipresent*, present everywhere by virtue of His activity and knowledge. Theists have traditionally agreed that this implies that God has no body; He is a *spirit*

> *"Allah is the light of the heavens and earth. The parable of His light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass; the Glass as it were a brilliant star; lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it:*

Light upon Light! Allah doth guide, whom He will to His Light: Allah doth set forth parables for men: and Allah doth know all things."

Qur'an 24:35

Just as God is not limited by space, so He is in some way not limited by time. God is an *eternal* spirit. There are some important differences in the way theists have understood God's being eternal. Many have thought of eternity as timelessness; God is thought of as having no "before and after". God is outside time altogether. Others have understood God's eternality as "being everlasting". God exists at all times in this view, having neither beginning nor end. He is not limited by time in the sense that it takes Him no time to carry out His actions and in the sense that His plans and purposes cannot be dimmed or frustrated by the passage of time. This divergence of views about the nature of God's eternality is not a recent development but goes back hundreds of years.

The divergence of views about God's eternality is also reflected in differing views of whether God in any sense changes. Obviously a perfect being must possess a degree of stability; one does not expect the Sublime Creator of the universe and everything in it to radically alter His character on a whim. Classically, many theists, especially those who think of God as timelessly eternal, have believed that God is absolutely unchangeable, or *immutable.* In this view, change of any kind is incompatible with perfection. Others have understood God's immutability as referring to His essential nature or attributes. God's character and purposes do not change, but He is aware of what goes on in His creation and capable of modifying His responses and actions in the light of that awareness.

This then is a brief recounting of the theistic concept of God. God is an eternal, self-existent spirit, unchangeable at least in His basic character and purposes, who exists necessarily. He is a personal being who is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect. God is the Creator of all things other than Himself and He is omnipresent in His creation, though without a body.

"Say: He is Allah,
The One and Only;
Allah, the Eternal, Absolute
He begetteth not, nor is He begotten
And there is none like unto Him."
Qur'an 112:1-4

In recent decades philosophers have done a good deal of interesting work on these concepts. Concepts of God have been developed and refined and their mutual consistency has been debated. The limits of this book do not allow us to go into this debate but the enthusiastic reader may pursue this discussion further in a fuller contexts.[1]

My own conclusion is that it would appear reasonable to claim that theism is logically coherent. Although many of the concepts used to characterise God must be carefully defined and qualified, no one has convincingly shown that theism as an overall view is inconsistent. The burden of proof surely rests on anyone who asserts that such a system is self-contradictory. No one has been able to show that theism is self-contradictory. It would seem appropriate then, to proceed to examine the reasonableness of theism. If we have good reason to believe theism is true, we also have good reason to think it is logically consistent. What grounds do we have for believing that the God of theism exists?

Proofs of God's Existence

Over the centuries many philosophers have developed arguments that purport to be proofs of God's existence; many others have attempted to find flaws in these arguments. Before attempting to explain some of these arguments and evaluate their success as proofs, it is necessary to say something about arguments and how they might be judged successful. Philosophers usually think

1. For a good introduction to the debate, see Nash, R.H. (1983), *The Concept of God*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan. For a more technical treatment of the issues, see Swinburne, R. (1977), *The Coherence of Theism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

of an argument as a set of statements or propositions (the premises), which show that another statement (the conclusion) is true or which increase the probability that the conclusion is true. Arguments can be either deductive or inductive. A good deductive argument is one in which the premises *entail* the conclusion: the conclusion cannot be false if the premises are true. A good inductive argument is one in which the premises make the conclusion more likely to be true. Most arguments given by philosophers for the existence of God have been deductive arguments, although some important twentieth-century philosophers have put forward inductive arguments.

In his book *Belief in God*, George Mavrodes outlines four ways of assessing the value of deductive arguments.[1] These four ways give us four questions that can be asked about an argument: Is it valid? Is it sound? Is it cogent? Is it convincing?

Validity is a term used by logicians in evaluating the formal structure of an argument. An argument is valid when the conclusion must be true if the premises are true. The following is an example of a valid argument:

1. All people from Scotland always speak with a Scottish accent
2. Adam Butt is from Scotland
3. Therefore Adam Butt always speaks with a Scottish accent.

Although this argument is valid, the conclusion is false, since Adam Butt does not speak with a Scottish accent. The argument is valid because the conclusion would be true if the premises were true. But in this case both premises are false.

An argument is *sound* if it is valid *and* all the premises of the argument are true. If an argument is sound, then its conclusion is true. Presumably those who want to prove God's existence will want, as a minimum, arguments that are sound.

It would seem clear, however, that the logical criteria of validity and soundness are not enough to characterise a successful proof of God's existence. It is possible for an argument to be sound (valid

1. Mavrodes, G. (1970), *Belief in God*, New York: Random House, pp. 17-48.]

with true premises) without anyone knowing it to be sound. A sound argument for God's existence will not be valuable unless it can be known to be sound. Mavrodes defines a *cogent* argument as one that is both sound and known by someone to be sound.

Adding cogency to our list of evaluative criteria complicates matters enormously because of the reference in the definition to "someone". Which arguments are cogent depends in part on people and what people know. We must ask not simply whether an argument is cogent but whether it is cogent for a certain person or type of person.

One might think that cogency would be all that one could ask of an argument but this is not the case. Mavrodes gives the following kind of example of an argument that is cogent to most people but is nevertheless fairly worthless as an argument:[1]

1. Either Jupiter has no satellite or George W. Bush is a Republican
2. Jupiter has a satellite
3. Therefore, George W. Bush is a Republican.

This argument is logically valid. Any argument of the form

Either p or q
Not p
Therefore q

is valid, and this argument can be reduced to that form. Furthermore the argument is sound. Both of its premises are true. (Premise 1 is true because a disjunctive proposition is true if either of its disjuncts is true). Furthermore, the argument is cogent, at least for most people, since most people know the premises are true and can recognise that the argument is valid. Nevertheless, to say the least, the argument is not inspiring.

The defect that it undoubtedly possesses suggests a fourth criterion for evaluating an argument. A useful argument is not only known to be cogent but is known to be cogent in a certain man-

1. Ibid. pp. 33-34. I have updated Mavrodes' example by substituting George W. Bush for Nixon.

ner. In the argument above, the first premise is known to be true because it is already known that George W. Bush is a Republican, which is the conclusion of the argument. Although it is conceivable that someone could know premise 1 without already knowing the conclusion, it seems unlikely. What one would like from an argument is that the argument be known to be cogent on grounds *independent* of the conclusion. Only in this way could an argument ever change someone's mind or add conviction to an already-held opinion. If an argument is cogent and can be known to be cogent by someone on grounds that are independent of the conclusion of the argument, Mavrodes terms the argument *convincing*, although perhaps *rationally convincing* would be a better phrase. Obviously whether an argument is rationally convincing, like its being cogent, will be relative to people and the knowledge they possess. In Mavrodes' terminology, the concept is in part "person-relative".[1]

It would seem reasonable to say that an argument will be a successful proof only if it is rationally convincing in the above sense. But since being rationally convincing is person-relative, it follows that a proof will also be relative to persons. Whether an argument is a successful proof depends not only on whether the argument is logically sound but also on whether, how and by whom the argument is known to be sound.

To whom should an argument be rationally convincing if it is to be a successful proof? An argument rationally convincing to even one person would possibly be valuable to that person. If this definition of a proof is adopted, then it seems plausible to claim that God's existence can indeed be proven. Many philosophers , however, would not be happy with such a definition of proof. They have been troubled by the thought that individuals are often mistaken in their beliefs. If one, and only one, person claimed to find an argument for God's existence rationally convincing, surely it is probable that the individual is mistaken. These philosophers want to claim that a genuine proof should be rationally convincing to everyone, or at least to all sane and rational people who have had opportunity to consider the argument. If we define a proof of

1. Ibid. p. 40

God's existence as an argument that is rationally convincing to all sane, rational people, then I shall argue that no proofs of God's existence can be given.

This conclusion is neither exciting nor disturbing, however, for anyone who has rejected neutralism. Even if the arguments fail as proofs, they may succeed in other ways and have other functions. Furthermore, the claim that to know something one must be able to prove it in the second sense of proof is one that carries an implicit commitment to neutralism, for, in effect, one is being asked to adopt a totally disinterested standpoint, accepting only those truths that all sane, rational people would accept. It seems unlikely to me (for reasons given in Chapter One) that any interesting things can be known or proved in this manner. Hence the failure to produce a proof of God's existence does not necessarily mean that no one has any knowledge of God. Nor does it necessarily mean that no one arrives at such knowledge by rationally convincing arguments. We will consider the possibility of this in the next chapter as we examine some specific arguments.

Chapter 3
Classical Arguments for the Existence of God

"Who put the colours in the rainbow?
Who put the salt into the sea?
Who put the cold into the snowflake?
Who made you and me?

Who put the scent into the roses?
Who taught the honey bee to dance?
Who put the tree inside the acorn?
It surely can't be chance?"[1]

Many different arguments for God's existence have been put forward over the centuries. Most of them fall into a relatively small number of groups or families. In this chapter, we shall consider four of the most important classes of arguments: ontological, cosmological, design (teleological) and moral.

It is important to recognise that there is no such thing as the cosmological argument or the teleological argument, although many writers on the subject have mistakenly assumed this to be the case. Many different versions of each of these arguments have been proposed, and some differ radically from others in the same category. For this reason alone one should be wary of claims to have given a final refutation of one of these types of arguments. It would be difficult to show that an objection applies to *all forms* of an argument and even more difficult to show that no one will ever invent a version of the argument to which the objection does not apply.

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1. Extract from a hymn by Paul Booth in BBC Radio for Schools' Hymnbook Come and Praise.

In the following discussions I will suggest the variety of versions possible for each type. It is impossible, obviously, to give a careful review of all the arguments that have been proposed or to list all the objections that have been raised. So in each case I will, after some general comments about the "family" of argument, consider one relatively simple version of the argument that is clearly logically valid. Then I will consider whether this argument could be rationally convincing to anyone. But of course, even if the specific argument I consider fails to convince, this does not prove that every argument of that type would fail.

Ontological Arguments

Ontological arguments are *a priori*: that is, they attempt to show that the very concept or idea of God implies His reality. If a person can clearly conceive of God, then he or she ought to be able to understand that God must exist. Credit for first formulating this argument is usually given to St. Anselm, the eleventh-century Archbishop of Canterbury. Various versions of the argument have been defended by such famous philosophers as Descartes and Leibniz. The twentieth century saw a great revival of interest in the argument, with thinkers such as Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga defending it.

Anselm's original version is developed in is *Proslogion* in the course of some reflections on "the fool who hath said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"[1] Anselm reasons that even to deny God's existence the fool must understand the idea of God. God must exist at least as an idea in the understanding of the fool. What is the idea of God? To Anselm, God is the greatest Possible being, "a being than which none greater can be conceived".

Anselm claims that it is greater or better to exist in reality than merely to exist in the understanding. Since God is by definition

1. Anselm's *Proslogion* is available in a number of editions. The crucial sections on the ontological argument are found in Chapters Two and Three and are included in many anthologies in the philosophy of religion, including the excellent one edited by Rowe, W.L. and Wainwright, W.J. (1973), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

the greatest Possible being, says Anselm, it is impossible for God to exist *only* in the understanding of the fool. For in that case a greater being than God could easily be conceived, namely, a being that exists both in understanding *and* in reality. Put into numbered steps the argument goes something like this:

1. God is the greatest Possible being
2. God exists at least in the mind or understanding
3. A being who exists only in the mind is not so great as a being who exists in reality as well as in the mind.
4. If God existed only in the mind, he would not be the greatest Possible being.
5. Hence God must exist in reality as well as in the mind.

As might be expected, this argument has met with many objections, for the claim that the existence of something can be inferred merely from its definition is implausible to most people. Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm, produced a parody of the argument, which attempted to prove that a perfect island – "an island than which none greater can be conceived" – must exist. Anselm's reply to this was essentially that the concept of God is a unique one. God, unlike islands and other finite objects, is a *necessary* being. The implication is that the concept of a "greatest or most perfect island" may not be coherent. Perhaps for any island we conceive, we could always conceive a more perfect one. But only a necessary being can be a greatest Possible being. The significance of Anselm's reply will be made evident below.

A famous objection made by Kant and others is that one cannot legitimately think of "existence" as a property that an entity mayor may not have or may have in varying degrees. To say of something that it exists is not to say that it has some property like "being red", but that the entity in question, with all its properties, has been actualised. When we think of an object, we always implicitly think of it as existing. But if existence is not a property, then it cannot be a property that adds to God's greatness, which is required by the argument. The debate whether existence is a property (or whether "exists" is a proper predicate) is not one we

can here resolve, though it does seem safe to claim that existence is no *ordinary* property.

Another popular objection is the claim that Anselm's argument tells us only about the definition of God; it cannot tell us whether anything satisfies that definition. Anselm tells us, quite properly, that when we think of God we think of Him as a real being, even as a necessarily real being, a being who cannot fail to exist. Such a definition, however, like all definitions, only tells us what God would be like if He existed. It cannot establish the fact that He exists.

Contemporary versions of the argument have focused on the concept of necessary existence, which Anselm employed in his reply to Gaunilo and in Chapter Three of his *Proslogion*. Some philosophers, such as Norman Malcolm, have actually claimed that Anselm developed two arguments. The first emphasised existence as a "great-making" property, which Malcolm thinks is fallacious, since existence is not a property at all. The second posited the concept of necessary existence.[1] The gist of the second argument, as Malcolm formulates it, is as follows: God is by definition a being who does not merely happen to exist. God can neither come into existence nor pass out of existence, since a being who could do either simply would not be God. It follows from this (according to Malcolm) that if God exists at all, then His existence is necessary. If He does not exist, then His existence is impossible. But either God exists or He does not exist, so God's existence is either necessary or impossible. Since it does not seem plausible to say that God's existence is impossible, then it follows that His existence is necessary. So if God's existence is possible, then it is necessary. More formally, the argument can be put like this:

1. If God exists, His existence is necessary.
2. If God does not exist, His existence is impossible.
3. Either God exists or He does not exist.
4. God's existence is either necessary or impossible.

1. Malcolm, N. (Jan. 1960), "Anselm's Ontological Arguments", *Philosophical Review*. This article can be found in Hick, J, (ed.) (1964), *The Existence of God*, New York: Macmillan, pp. 47-70.

5. God's existence is possible (not impossible)
6. Therefore God's existence is necessary.

How should we evaluate this argument? Is it formally valid? It certainly appears to be. Is it sound? To be sound, the premises must be true. Of the five premises, the most troubling is number five. How do we know that God's existence is really possible? The premise appears innocuous enough: it seems as if we were saying simply that there might be a God. It turns out to be a rather powerful claim, however, since God's existence is only possible if it is necessary. Why should not the atheist reject No. 5 and claim that God's existence, when the matter is fully understood, can be seen to be impossible? Since God does not exist (according to the atheist) it is not possible that He ever has or ever will.

On the other hand, anyone who believes that God actually exists will have to judge that this premise is true and that therefore the argument is sound. For the *possibility* of God's existence surely follows from the actuality of His existence. Still we should recall that a successful proof must be more than merely sound. It must be rationally convincing.

Here the argument seems to fail, for it is hard to see why an atheist should not reject premise No. 5 and steadfastly maintain the impossibility of God's existence. And even though theists will judge the argument sound and it will therefore be for them cogent, it will not be rationally convincing for them either unless they can somehow *know* that God's existence is possible without inferring it from His actual existence. We must recall that, for an argument to be rationally convincing for someone, the premises must be known to that person on grounds independent of the conclusion.

Even if the argument fails as a rationally convincing proof, however, it may still accomplish other tasks. Alvin Plantinga, a defender of a contemporary version of the ontological argument, asserts that, although the argument may not be a proof, it does show that it is reasonable to believe in God. The key premise, that God's existence is possible, although it may not be known, is a proposition that could reasonably be accepted: the argument

shows the "rational acceptability" of theism.[1] This seems sound but it should be noted that the atheist can perhaps make a similar claim by expressing that it is not contrary to reason to assert that God's existence is impossible.

Karl Barth interprets Anselm's argument not as a proof but as an attempt to understand more deeply what is accepted by faith.[2] It does seem very plausible that Anselm's purposes in putting forward this argument may be very different from those of contemporary philosophers who have defended the argument. In any case, regardless of the value of the ontological argument as a proof, reflection on it does deepen our appreciation of God as a necessary being.

The argument also serves the function of "smoking out" the atheist. If the argument is valid, then the person who wishes to deny that God exists must claim that God's existence is impossible. That may be a stronger claim than the person may initially have wished to make. This last point may be generalised into a moral that can be applied to all the theistic arguments. The arguments can be rejected, but the person who rejects them pays a price. For to deny a proposition is logically equivalent to asserting another proposition. To deny p is to assert not-p. In some cases the assertions required to reject theistic arguments may be troublesome ones.

Cosmological Arguments

Cosmological arguments are, as the name implies, attempts to infer the existence of God from the existence of the cosmos or universe. Such arguments may take as their starting point the existence of the universe as a whole, of particular objects, or even of one individual object. These arguments are sometimes called first-cause arguments because they attempt to infer that God must exist as the first or ultimate cause of the universe.

1. Plantinga, A. (1977), God, *Freedom, and Evil*, Ground Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

2. Barth, K. (1960), Anselm: *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, translated by Ian Robertson, Richmond: John Knox Press.

The historical roots of this argument go back to the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, but it was more fully developed in the medieval period by Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Of the five arguments for God's existence given by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, the first three appear to be versions of the cosmological argument. Later on, Samuel Clarke and Leibniz defended their own versions, and in the twentieth century the argument has been defended by Richard Taylor. Richard Swinburne defends the argument in a somewhat novel way by treating it as an inductive argument, or probability argument, rather than a strictly deductive argument.

Temporal versions of the cosmological argument claim (or assume) that the universe had to have a beginning, a first moment of existence. To explain its existence in that first moment, a cause is necessary, and God is inferred as that cause. In these versions God is the "first cause" in the temporal sense. He is the one who began the series of events we call the universe by bringing into existence the initial objects that composed the universe. By itself this argument seems to demand only a deistic conception of God, but someone who holds to it can consistently accept theism by claiming also that God continues to be involved in His creation.

That the universe had a beginning in time has been argued in various ways. Some have claimed that an infinite temporal series, such as the past would be if the universe is eternal, is impossible.[1] Others have claimed that scientific cosmological theories, such as the big bang theory, are evidence for the universe having had a beginning.[2]

We shall not pursue these claims further because the majority of philosophers who have defended the cosmological argument have claimed that it is sound regardless of whether the universe had a beginning. Aquinas, Leibniz, Clarke and Taylor have defended non-temporal versions. They have all claimed that God is the necessary cause of the existence of the universe both now and for as long as the universe has existed, even if it has always

1. The historical roots of this view have been traced by William Craig (1979) in *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*, London: Macmillan.

2. See Hasker, W. (1983), *Metaphysics*, InterVarsity Press, pp.110-17, for an example of the claim that the Big Bang theory supports theism.

existed. God is the reason why there is a universe at all, regardless of whether the universe is young, old or infinitely old.

We must also credit the Muslim scholars al-Kindi (ninth century CE) and al-Ghazzali (1058-1111) who developed the *kalam* argument to explain God's creation of the universe. The *kalam* argument is cosmological because it seeks to prove that God was the first cause of the universe. Furthermore, in its modern version (William Craig, 1979) it leads to the concept of a personal creator of the universe:

> "Since everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence, and since the universe began to exist, we conclude, therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence... Transcending the entire universe there exists a cause which brought the universe into being... But even more: we may plausibly argue that the cause of the universe is a personal being... If the universe began to exist, and if the universe is caused, then the cause of the universe must be a personal being who freely chooses to create the world... the *kalam* cosmological argument leads to a personal Creator of the universe."[1]

What is it about the universe that supports the claim that it requires a cause and that its cause must be God? The usual answer hinges on what may be termed the *contingency* of the universe, each object we see (and all of them taken collectively) appears to be the kind of thing that does exist but could easily not exist. There seems to be no evident reason why the objects of our universe exist, or even why there should be a universe at all. The things we see do not appear to be things that had to exist, things that exist *necessarily*. Rather, they are all contingent, things that do exist but might not have. It is then natural to wonder why they exist. What is the cause of their existence? If the cause is something contingent, then its existence will also require an explanation. Ultimately, the explanation of contingent beings' existence will be incomplete unless there exists a *necessary* being, a being that can-

1. Craig, W, (1979), *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*, London: Macmillan.

not fail to exist, who is the cause of the existence of all contingent beings. Only such a necessary being will fail to require some further explanation. We can formalise the key elements in this argument as follows:

1. Some contingent beings exist.
2. If any contingent beings exist, then a necessary being must exist (because contingent beings require a necessary being as their ultimate cause).
3. Therefore there exists a necessary being (which is the ultimate cause of the existence of contingent beings).

If we are willing to define *God* as "a necessary being who is the cause of the existence of contingent beings", then the argument, if successful, is a proof of God's existence.

Once more the argument appears to be formally valid, so the interesting questions are whether it is sound and rationally convincing. The reader will recall that we can make a judgement on the soundness of an argument by assessing the validity of its premises.

Premise 1 says simply that, "some contingent objects exist", To me this seems highly plausible, but it does not seem to be so to everyone. Some people might want to hold that the matter (or energy) in the universe is eternal. Particular objects come and go, but the matter of which they are composed is, even more than diamonds, forever. So far this is not a real objection to the argument, which is consistent with the eternality of the universe. But suppose someone went further and claimed that the matter of the universe is not only eternal but exists necessarily. It could not have failed to exist. If that person then went on to claim that the only objects that *really* exist are the eternal constituents of matter (whatever those may be), then he would be denying Premise 1. He would be saying no contingent beings exist.

Without this last stipulation (that only eternal objects are real) the objection does not strictly undermine the argument, because it still would imply the existence of a necessary reality as the cause of complex contingent beings. However, the cause would, in this case, be matter itself, Matter would be "a necessary being" and

would satisfy the argument's definition of God. In any case, someone who thinks of matter as "necessary" thereby implies that at least one of the features of the theistic God is actually a feature of the natural world. It is not so much that God's existence is denied as that the existence of God *as a person distinct from the universe* is being denied. Implicit then in a rejection of Premise 1 is something much like a commitment to pantheism. The person who rejects the argument is committed not merely to saying that the material universe always has in fact existed, but that the universe could not possibly fail to exist. A reasonable person can reject the argument by rejecting Premise 1, but only at a price. That price is the acceptance of a rival metaphysical perspective that is either pantheistic or close to it.

It seems more likely that contemporary Western critics of the argument would quarrel with Premise 2: "If any contingent beings exist, then a necessary being must exist, because a contingent being requires a cause of a certain sort, namely, a necessary being." This assumption is complex and could be denied in two ways. First, someone might just claim that contingent beings do not require a cause at all. Second, someone might claim that though contingent beings require a cause, the causes are in turn contingent. At that point the critic could either repeat the first response (contingent beings do not need causes) or simply claim that there is an infinite series of contingent beings, each of which has another contingent being as its cause. In summary, one can reject premise 2 by claiming either that contingent beings have no cause or that there is an infinite series of contingent causes.

The first or "no-cause" objection is essentially a claim that contingent objects have no explanation; they just *exist*. Their existence is what is often called a brute fact. The defender of the argument will claim that it is unreasonable to say that the existence of contingent things is simply a brute fact.

The second response, the "infinite series of causes" view, is somewhat different, since the proponent of this objection claims that each and every contingent thing has a cause – namely, some other contingent thing or set of things. Since the series is infinite, no individual lacks a cause. The proponent of the cosmological argument can deal with this infinite series view in two ways. First,

he/she might concede that each and every individual contingent object has an explanation but claim that what has not been explained is the existence of the whole series. Why are there any contingent beings at all? This effectively converts the argument from a "part" argument to a "whole" argument.

The second option for the proponent of the argument is to claim that the explanations of existence offered by the infinite series are defective in some way. An infinite series of contingent causes would necessarily be an incomplete series. An explanation of the existence of each contingent being could also be claimed to be incomplete. Contingent object A exists because of contingent object B, but since B's existence is contingent, it is natural to ask why B exists as well. To the extent that the question is unanswered, one could conclude that A's existence has not been completely explained. This does not mean that the explanation is not complete enough for ordinary practical purposes, but it does mean that the explanation is in some sense incomplete.

This is why the defender of the cosmological argument finds the infinite series view defective. To postulate as an explanation for the existence of a particular contingent object an infinite, incomplete series is really to admit that no final, determinate explanation can be given. If this is correct, then the infinite series view turns out at bottom to share something in common with the no-cause view. Both claim that the existence of contingent beings has no determinative cause; both therefore entail that there is in the final analysis no complete explanation for the existence of such beings. The proponent of the cosmological argument, on the other hand, clearly accepts what has been called the "principle of sufficient reason". He holds that for every fact there must be a finally adequate explanation. The existence of contingent beings cannot be a brute fact, since such beings do not themselves explain their existence.

The person who denies Premise 2 of the argument is simply denying the principle of sufficient reason. He is claiming that contingent objects have no ultimate reason for being; they just *exist*. Once more it is evident that rejection of the argument carries with it a price – namely, the acceptance of a rival metaphysical system. In this case the rival system is naturalism, for naturalism is the

view that the natural order exists "on its own". The naturalist rejects the cosmological argument by claiming that the existence of the objects in nature is just a brute fact *ultimately*, though of course provision and partial explanations of why some beings exist can be given in terms of other finite beings. But no final explanation can be given of why there should be such things as finite beings at all.

If we ask, "Why are there any beings at all?" the naturalist will answer either that there is no reason or that the question is a meaningless one that cannot be answered. Some naturalists have taken the latter position; others, particularly some of the atheistic existentialists, have taken the former line. Writers such as Sartre and Camus have described the world as *absurd*, meaning that no reason can be given for its existence. The world is the sort of thing that ought to have an explanation, but it does not.[1]

Is the cosmological argument rationally convincing? It may be to some people. Many people have had powerful experiences of what may be called the contingency of things in the universe, including their own existence. Although our familiarity with finite objects may indeed breed contempt, or at least a lack of wonder about them, most people can recall experiences in which they have suddenly become aware of the enormous oddity that anything exists at all – or the oddity that just *these* particular things exist. I am inclined to call these "experiences of cosmic wonder", and I think one's evaluation of the cosmological argument turns heavily on how such experiences are interpreted and evaluated. If one dismisses the experience as meaningless, trivial or neurotic, one will dismiss the question "Why do things exist?" as meaningless, trivial or neurotic. If one accepts the experience as significant, then one will admit that the question posed by the cosmological argument is meaningful. One can meaningfully ask, "Why is there a universe?" Here the debate will turn on whether humans have a right to expect an answer, or whether the universe in some sense *must* make sense. This is, in effect, the question of whether the principle of sufficient reason is true.

1. See Albert Camus (1955) "An absurd Reasoning", in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, New York: Random House, pp. 3-48.

I can see no way of disproving the contention of the naturalist that the question has no meaning and cannot be asked, or his alternative contention that it can be asked but not answered, at least to the satisfaction of the naturalist. (One might, of course, try to show that the consequences of rejecting the principle of sufficient reason in other contexts are unacceptable). Hence, if by proof we mean an argument that is rationally convincing to everyone, the cosmological argument certainly fails. But it does powerfully evoke and articulate the theistic view of the relation that holds between God and contingent beings. And the person who finds the question "Why are there things?" meaningful and who is willing to claim that there must be a reason why things exist, will find the argument convincing.

Certainly the argument helps us to better understand the nature of theism and how it differs from rival views. It helps us to see that the question of whether God exists is not a question like "Is there a Loch Ness monster?".. The question about God is not merdy a question about another entity but a question about the character of the universe as a whole. The rejection of the cosmological argument implicitly carries with it a commitment to a rival metaphysical view such as pantheism or naturalism. Ultimately, the question is not "Can God's existence be proved?" but "Which metaphysical view is most plausible?". A theist may find the argument helpful in coming to the conclusion that theism is indeed a reasonable way of viewing the universe.

It is worth noting how limited a conclusion the cosmological argument reaches. By itself, the argument only seems to show the existence of a necessary being that is the cause of the universe. While this does include some key elements of the theistic conception of God, it obviously leaves out quite a few important ones. The conclusion is compatible with many views of God. So, even if it is successful, the cosmological argument hardly constitutes more than an entering wedge into the knowledge of God. If someone accepts the conclusion, the proper attitude for him to adopt is surely a desire to learn more about God. Such a person should show an alert sensitivity about how he may obtain additional knowledge of God.

Teleological (Design) Arguments

In a broad sense, a teleological argument is also a cosmological argument: it too begins with the existence of the cosmos. It begins, however, not merely with its existence but with its character as a *cosmos*, an orderly universe. It is often referred to as "the argument from design".

Like the cosmological argument, the teleological argument finds its roots in classical Greece. Furthermore, it is clearly present in medieval times as the fifth of St Thomas Aquinas's "Five Ways" to prove God's existence. In terms of popularity, however, the heyday of the argument was the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A particularly famous version was developed by William Paley (1743-1805), an English theologian. Paley begins his treatise on *Natural Theology* (1802) as follows:

> "In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and was asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that for anything I knew to the contrary it had lain there forever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that for anything I knew the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone; why is it not as admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, namely, that when we come to inspect the watch we perceive – what we could not discover in the stone – that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g. that they are so formed and adjusted so as to produce motion and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day. That if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, or placed after any other manner or in any other order than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or

> none which would have answered the use that is now served by it..."[1]

In the twentieth century, the teleological argument has been defended by Richard Taylor, F.R. Tennant and Richard Swinburne. Tennant and Swinburne, particularly, have developed the argument not as a strict deductive proof but as an attempt to show the *probability* of theism.

The teleological argument begins from the fact that the natural world appears to exhibit purposive order or design and infers that its cause must therefore be an intelligent designer. Paley's argument (quoted above) is a good illustration, as is Aquinas's version of the argument below:

> "The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see things that lack knowledge, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that they achieve their end, not fortuitously, but designedly. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God..."[2]

Aquinas here claims that many entities in nature act for an end, or *telos*. He does not give any examples but it is not hard to do so. Most if not all animals, for example, appear to be self-regulating mechanisms that are designed to maintain their own existence and reproduce themselves. Many of the parts of the animals contribute to this overall goal by realising some more particular end or goal.

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1. William Paley, *Natural Theology*, 1802.

2. St Thomas Aquinas's "Five Ways" are found in his *Summa Theologica*, 1,2,3. This section is included in numerous anthologies. My quotation is taken from Rowe and Wainwright, eds, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, p. 119.

Lungs exchange oxygen for carbon dioxide; hearts pump blood throughout the body.

Aquinas mentions two features present in nature that together imply design. The first is *order*. Things in nature "act always or nearly always in the same way". The second feature is *value*. The order in nature brings about results that are clearly good. We shall term this kind of order "beneficial order". Clearly Aquinas thinks that a regular, orderly process that achieves a beneficial result is evidence that one is dealing with intelligent design. Beneficial order, he says, does not occur by chance.

How does Aquinas know this? Why could orderly processes that bring about beneficial results not be the result of chance? Contemporary defenders of the argument, such as Richard Swinburne, have admitted that it is not logically impossible for these processes to occur by chance. Thus in their view the argument fails as a strict deductive proof. However, although it is perhaps possible for such results to occur by chance, it is, they claim, implausible or improbable. Hence the argument shows the probability or plausibility of theism.

One way (though perhaps not the only way) of defending the crucial claim that it is improbable that beneficial order could be the result of chance is to make an appeal to our experience of analogous entities. Complex machines like watches and cameras show the same kind of complex, beneficial order as do natural objects. We know that these machines are the result of intelligent design, and it is reasonable to conclude that objects in nature that are analogous to these machines are probably to be explained in an analogous manner. Paley's famous argument (outlined earlier) proceeds in this way and David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* gives a well-known statement of the argument in the form of an analogy. Hume also presents many criticisms of the argument, some of which will be considered presently.

It is worth noting that teleological arguments can, like cosmological arguments, be divided into those that begin with the whole of nature and those that begin with parts of nature. The former attempts to show that nature as a whole must be understood as one teleological system. The latter takes as its starting point the existence of particular teleological systems within nature. The

advantage of the "whole" argument is that the conclusion will obviously be the existence of a cause of the whole of nature. The disadvantage is that it is difficult to show that the universe as a whole aims at some end or goal. It may but it does not seem evident that it does. The "part" type of argument is therefore easier to defend but it suffers the disadvantage that an inference about the cause of the whole of nature is made on the basis of the character of some parts of nature, which accordingly somewhat reduces the probability of the conclusion.

Let us now formulate some versions of the teleological argument and consider their merits and demerits. The following is a simple version:

1. There exist in nature many examples of beneficial order.
2. Beneficial order is best explained as the result of an intelligent designer.
3. Therefore, nature is probably the result of an intelligent designer.

The conclusion of this argument can at best be probable for two reasons: (1) an inference about the whole of nature is being drawn from parts of nature; (2) it does not seem to be certain that beneficial order can only come from intelligence.

Most criticisms of this argument will focus on Premise 2. Must we explain the order in the universe as the work of a designer? Alternative formulations of the argument may shift the burden of criticism to other premises. For example, the argument could be put as follows:

1. Nature contains many instances of design.
2. Designed entities are the result of a designer.
3. Therefore nature is probably the work of a designer.

This formulation makes the second premise virtually tautologous, but now the critic will question Premise 1. Is the order in nature genuine design, or is it merely apparent design? The underlying problem remains how one knows that the beneficial order is not simply, in Aquinas's words, "fortuitous".

The analogical versions of the argument, as mentioned, try to confront this problem head-on. For example, we might argue as follows:

1. Objects in nature are analogous to man-made machines.
2. Man-made machines are the result of intelligent design.
3. Analogous effects will have analogous causes.
4. Therefore, objects in nature are the result of something analogous to intelligent design.

As we see from this, the appeal to analogy can generate a self-contained argument. Alternatively, the considerations appealed to here could be employed to back up the debatable second premise in our original argument.

In general, criticisms of teleological arguments can be divided into two groups. The first includes those criticisms that attack the strengths of the argument by claiming that intelligent design is not necessary to explain the order in the universe. The second group of criticisms focuses on the religious worth of the argument. Is the intelligent designer the argument infers identical with the God of theism? Both kinds of criticisms are given classical statements in Hume's *Dialogues Concening Natural Religion*.

Let us take the former type of attack first. Hume considers the argument mainly in its analogical form; hence many of his criticisms centre on the strength of the analogy between the natural order and human machines. First, he claims that other analogies are possible. The universe does resemble a machine in some ways, and machines are at least usually products of intelligence. But the universe also resembles other things – plants, for example, which hatch from seeds and are not the product of intelligence, or animals, which are conceived by sexual reproduction.[1] Hume's argument here is clearly question-begging. In order for it to have force, we should have to know already that natural objects such as plants and animals are not the result of intelligent design, but that is precisely the question at issue.

1. Hume, D. (ed. Norman Kemp Smith 1947), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Bobbs-Merrill, pp. 170-81.

Hume also objects that the universe is too singular a phenomenon to form hypotheses about its cause.[1] Since we have no experience of universe making, we have no way of testing alternative hypotheses about its cause. This objection seems to assume that it is not possible to form hypotheses about singular objects. This is clearly a false assumption, however: biologists are always developing hypotheses about the origin of life, even though life is, as far as we presently know, a singular phenomenon. In any case, we have no experience of the evolution of other life forms but that is no barrier to scientific attempts to hypothesise about the origins of life. If Hume were right here, then no arguments from analogy would have any value, for he is in effect claiming that we cannot trust an analogy unless we have repeated direct experiences of what we are making an analogical inference about, in this case universes. But if we *had* such direct experience, analogous reasoning would be unnecessary.

Perhaps Hume's most serious objection is his claim that alternative explanations of the order of the universe are possible. Perhaps the order in the universe is somehow inherent in matter. [2] Perhaps the order of the universe is only apparent order, which is in reality the result of mechanical processes.[3] Hume wrote before Darwin, but a Darwinian theory of evolution would appear to be the type of mechanical process he was groping toward. When interpreted naturalistically, Darwinian evolution gives a rival explanation of the order in the universe. The fact that creatures are so well adapted to their environments, and that the organs of creatures are mutually co-ordinated, is to be explained – according to Darwin's theory – as a result of random variations and the 'survival of the fittest' (a term coined not by Darwin but by his contemporaneous promoter Herbert Spencer). A certain amount of random variation occurs in nature. When a variation occurs which gives a creature some edge over its competitors, it will be more likely to survive and pass on to its offspring the favourable change. Given enough time, what appears to be design can be explained mechanistically. Clearly, it is the popularity of evolutionary theory

1. Ibid. pp. 148-50.
2. Ibid. pp. 146, 174
3. Ibid. pp. 182-85.

more than anything else that has eroded the credibility of the teleological argument.

To this evolutionary challenge three lines of response are possible. First, some have directly attacked the theory of evolution itself, arguing that creation provides a superior scientific explanation. This is the position of those who have attempted to mandate (in the USA) the teaching of "creation science" as an alternative to evolution – and who would undoubtedly find ideological support amongst some sections of orthodox Muslim and Jewish opinion.

A second line of response is to concede that an evolutionary process has occurred but to argue that the process is not one that can be understood or explained purely mechanistically. Chance variation and natural selection are inadequate to explain the order that has evolved. Rather, at least at certain points, it seems more plausible to see the process as one guided by intelligent design.

A third response concedes the validity of Darwinian or Neo-Darwinian theories as *scientific* explanations of the order in the universe, but questions whether some more *ultimate* explanation is not still required. Mechanical explanations and teleological or design explanations are not always incompatible. If a person who desires to achieve some result, say the production of transistors, designs a machine to achieve that result, then two kinds of explanations are possible. One can explain the appearance of the transistors mechanically in terms of the operation of the machine. But of course the machine operates as it does *because* it is a means for achieving the result: it was designed to do so. Hence a more complete explanation of the result in terms of the purpose of the machine's designer is also legitimate. It is not by accident that the machine achieves the beneficial results it does achieve.

In a similar way, the defender of the teleological argument might claim that the evolutionary process, even if it is a mechanical process, is simply the *means* whereby God, the intelligent designer, realises His purposes. The evolutionary process, if it does indeed occur, occurs only because the laws of nature operate as they do. These laws are themselves a clear example then of order whose *ultimate* outcome is beneficial order. The defender of the teleological argument can therefore claim that evolution in no way lessens the beneficial order of the universe or the need to

explain that order. Rather, evolution simply increases our understanding of the complex and ingenious means whereby the designer-God realises His purposes:

> *"He is the Creator out of nothing, the Fashioner, the Designer. His are the most beautiful Names. Everything in heaven and on earth glorifies Him; and He is the Mighty, the Wise."*
>
> Qur'an 59:24

In evaluating this kind of response, the question we must ask is whether the basic order of the universe, the natural laws that have operated to bring about the apparent design in nature (if evolution is true), is a brute fact. The critic of the argument will insist that no explanation can be given of why the basic laws of nature operate; they just do. The defender of the argument naturally wonders why we have laws of nature at all and, especially, why we have the particular ones that have produced much beneficial order. It seems to him arbitrary and implausible to say that such laws are simply brute facts. Once more, as in the case of the cosmological argument, the person who rejects the argument seems to be placed in the position of arbitrarily stopping the quest for an explanation. I conclude, therefore, that although the argument is not conclusive in the sense of being rationally convincing to everyone, it does have considerable force if understood as an attempt to show that the hypothesis of a designer is plausible.

But what about Hume's second set of objections? As we noted above, Hume also objects to the argument on religious grounds. He says that the argument does not really show that the god of theism exists. The designer of the world might in many ways fail to resemble the God of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The designer might not be truly omnipotent in power, knowledge or goodness, but limited in various ways.[1] Indeed, says Hume, the designer might be not a single being but a committee.

Richard Swinburne has responded to these objections by claiming that the hypothesis of theism is more probable than the "finite

1. Ibid. pp. 165-69. Hume also objects that the designer would not be wholly good because of imperfections in the design. We will consider this problem in the next chapter, which deals with the problem of evil.

god(s)" Hume considers, because theism is simpler.[1] The fact that the laws which bring about the order of the universe seem universal points to one cause rather than many. Swinburne says that it is simpler to hypothesise a God with infinite power and knowledge than a God with great though limited powers.

The hypothesis of a *limited* God would inevitably raise the question of why God has just the amount of power and knowledge He does possess, a question that would be unanswerable.

But even if Swinburne is right, Hume's objections do nonetheless diminish the certainty of the conclusion of an argument that was only probable in the beginning. But this simply entails that the teleological argument, like the cosmological argument, is limited in what it conveys about God. A reasonable person who accepted the argument would hardly be content with the knowledge of God thereby gained but he or she would be eager to learn more about God. Natural theology, even if successful, is not supposed to give the kind of detailed knowledge of God to be gained from possible special revelations and religious experiences:

> *"It is He Who sent down to thee (step by step), in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind; and He sent down the Criterion (of judgement between right and wrong)".*[2]

To a certain extent, however, the defects of the cosmological and teleological arguments cancel each other out. The cosmological argument concludes that a necessary being, who is the cause of the universe, must exist but it does not, at face value, suggest that this cause must be personal. The teleological argument attempts to show that the cause of the universe must be intelligent and therefore personal but it does not, at face value, show that this being must be a necessary being. Clearly, the two arguments complement each other and therefore could be viewed not as separate

1. Swinburne, R. (1979), *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 141-42

2. The Qur'an 3:3-4.

arguments but as parts of a general case for the plausibility of theism.

Someone might claim, of course, that the conclusions of the two arguments refer to two different beings and that the arguments cannot thus be used together. Here one could reply, in the spirit of Swinburne, that this seems logically possible but not plausible. It seems far-fetched to suppose that the being responsible for the very existence of the natural order would not also, at least ultimately, be responsible for its special pervasive characteristics.

Nevertheless, if one asks whether the teleological argument is proof of God's existence in the sense of being rationally convincing to all, the answer must surely be negative. But perhaps that conclusion merely shows how unreliable such a concept of proof is.

Moral Arguments

The roots of the moral argument go back, philosophically, to Plato's conviction that the source of all reality and truth must be the "Form of the Good" and, religiously, to the monotheistic teaching that moral obligations must be understood as divine commands. Although not popular among philosophers, this argument is probably more convincing to ordinary people than any other. The voice of conscience is still regarded by many as the voice of God.

The fact that the argument is not so popular among philosophers as among ordinary people might appear to count strongly against it but I am not sure this is so. Fashions come and go in philosophy as in any other field, so the fact that an argument is not currently fashionable is not terribly significant in my judgement.

The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, developed a type of moral argument in the late eighteenth century but his argument was unusual in several ways. Kant did not claim that the existence of morality was theoretical evidence for the truth of theism but rather that the situation of a human being, who is under moral obligation as a rational, practical being, makes it necessary for that

person to *postulate* God's existence. The underlying insight seems to be this: it is unreasonable to try to realise moral ideals in the universe if the universe, and the laws whereby results in it are achieved, are indifferent to morality. The rational moral agent must see the universe as the arena for moral endeavour and so must believe that a moral reality lies behind the natural order.

Like the teleological argument, the moral argument is best constructed probabilistically as a claim that God's existence provides the most probable or plausible explanation of a certain fact, in this case the existence of moral obligations. A single version might go like this:

1. (Probably) unless there is a God, there cannot be objectively binding moral obligations.
2. There are objectively binding moral obligations.
3. Therefore (probably) there is a God.

Many people find the argument unconvincing because they reject premise 2, claiming that there are no objectively binding moral obligations. Propositions like "a person is obligated to tell the truth even when it does not benefit him" can, of course, be interpreted in a variety of ways. One of the more popular views is that of *cultural relativism*, which interprets moral obligations in terms of social approval and disapproval. Every society approves and disapproves of particular actions and expresses that approval and disapproval by training the young to think of those actions as "right" or "wrong". Which acts are designated right or wrong differs from culture to culture. Therefore there are no transcendent moral obligations for God to explain. Morality – according to this view – is simply a product of human culture.

Cultural relativism, however, faces some severe problems. First, it may be that the cultural relativist exaggerates the degree of relativism found among different cultures. There are widespread similarities in basic moral beliefs in cultures all over the world. This is particularly true if one recognises that a great deal of what appears to be moral disagreement may actually be a disagreement about the facts. Two cultures might agree that it would be a bad thing to sell one's soul to Satan to gain power over one's

neighbours but one might believe this is impossible while the other believes that it actually occurs. Hence one does not punish witches while the other does.

Even more basically, it is not clear why the existence of moral disagreements among cultures means that there is no objective moral truth. Culture X may say action A is right, while Culture Y may say action A is wrong? Why should one conclude from this that A is objectively neither right nor wrong? Would it not be more useful to infer that one culture is right and the other culture wrong? Or both cultures could be wrong, or both partially right. In any case, relativism in moral *beliefs* and practices does not imply that moral *truth* is relative.

The most serious problem with cultural relativism is that it makes it impossible to evaluate cultures morally. Since there is no higher moral standard than culture, one cannot criticise what is approved of in a culture as immoral, even if the culture approves of infanticide, racism or genocide. This view makes the whole idea of moral progress impossible. One moral practice cannot be really better than another unless it is possible for some practices to be truly better than others.

Another popular way of rejecting our second premise is to accept an even more extreme relativism – individual relativism. On this view, whatever the individual accepts as right is right for him. A view that is theoretically different, but has the same practical result, is ethical emotivism. The emotivist says that there are no real moral obligations. When a person says that an act is wrong, he is not stating a fact but only expressing his individual emotions or attitude about the act.

It is extremely difficult, in my judgement, to hold consistently to any form of relativism or *emotivism* in practice. It is easy enough to say that there are no real moral obligations; but most people cannot help believing that, when they are wronged by someone else, the act is really wrong. If a person maliciously trips me and then laughs because I have cut my lip, it will seem to me that the person has wronged me and that it is a true fact that he has done so. It is no good to say that the person who tripped me thought the act was right and therefore for him it was right! The act was wrong, and the person should have recognised this and regretted

the act, even if he felt no such emotion. The person who did the tripping is likely to say the same thing when *he* is tripped.

So far we have been examining those views that criticise the argument by rejecting Premise 2: "There are objectively binding moral obligations". What about Premise 1, "(Probably), unless there is a God, there cannot be objectively binding moral obligations"? Some non-theists, such as Sartre, have accepted this premise, agreeing with Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* and arguing that "if there is no God, then everything is permitted".[1] Sartre agrees that there can be no objective moral obligations without God and he therefore tries to ground morality in the individual's choice, which would seem to be a form of individual relativism.

Other non-theists, however, are unwilling to concede premise 1. Naturalistic humanism, for example, tries to show that moral obligations can exist even if there is no God. This can be done in two ways: (1) one can claim that the existence of moral obligations is simply an ultimate fact that needs no explanation; (2) one can try to give an alternative explanation for the existence of moral obligations. The latter is the more popular alternative.

It is impossible to survey briefly all the alternative ways naturalists have tried to explain morality but these are three of the more common views: (1) moral obligations are grounded in self-interest; (2) moral obligations are grounded in natural instinct; (3) moral obligations can be explained as a result of evolution. We will briefly consider each of these views in turn.

The first view basically boils down to the claim that morality "pays". One should be honest because in the long run it is the "best policy". The reasoning is that if I am cruel or dishonest to others then they will most likely return the favour. Since I do not want this to happen, I must respect what others want. This view faces two major problems. First, it seems that there are at least a few cases where doing my moral duty might require a sacrifice, such as giving my life, which could not possibly result in a net benefit for me (assuming, as the naturalist does, that there is no heaven or hell). So morality does not always pay, even if it usually does. Second, what follows from the "self-interest" view is not that

1. Dostoevsky, F.M. *The Brothers Karamazov.*

I should always want to be moral but that I should always want to *appear* to be moral to my fellows. When I am sure I can get away with it, there is no reason not to ignore any moral obligations. Some say that morality is grounded not in what pays off for myself but in what is best for all. But that is *part* of morality; it names what is to be explained but does not itself explain. Why am I as an individual obligated to do what is best for all instead of for myself alone?

The second naturalistic position attempts to view moral obligations to help other people as based on natural instincts, such as the impulse to feel sympathy for others. Doubtless there are such instincts, but it is hard to see how their existence could be an adequate explanation of morality. For one thing, there are clearly instincts that are, at least usually, bad, and it is hard to see the basis for classifying some instincts as good and others as bad, unless there is some higher standard for evaluating instincts. Second, it is questionable whether any instinct is wholly good or bad. Rather it would seem that critical reflection is required to determine whether instincts should be followed in particular cases. In fact, most people seem to experience moral obligations as requiring them frequently to override their strongest instincts.

The third way naturalists try to explain morality is to appeal to evolutionary theory. Human beings who had the peculiar notions that they were "obligated" to be kind, helpful and so on were more likely to survive than their rivals in the process of natural selection. Evolution might in this way explain how people could *believe* they are morally obligated; people who had such beliefs were more likely to survive. But it is hard to see how evolution could explain the fact that a human being is *actually obligated.* In fact, someone who accepted this evolutionary theory could quite consistently reject the existence of actual moral obligations, reducing this view to that of those who attack the other premise in the moral argument.

Generally, the heart of the theistic contention is that there would be something very odd about the existence of moral obligations in a naturalistic universe. How, in a world that is ultimately the product of time, chance and material particles, did there come to be such things as moral obligations? Perhaps the strongest

response of the naturalist is simply to insist that moral obligations are another brute fact. But it certainly does seem to be an odd kind of brute fact in a *naturalistic* universe.

In what way does God's existence explain the existence of moral obligations? How does it remove or lessen this oddity? Here theists have given a variety of answers. Some have claimed that moral obligations are simply divine commands, so that without God to issue the commands there would be no moral obligations. Such divine command theories can be developed in two ways. First, one can claim that it is God's commanding an action that makes the action right or morally good. This view is open to the objection that God's commands are then arbitrary: God cannot command us to do what is right *because* it is right. A more defensible position claims that God's commanding an action does not make it right or good, but it makes it *obligatory* for humans. God recognises what is right and commands us to do it: His commanding us to do it creates an obligation for us to do what is right.[1]

Other theists reject the divine-command theory as an explanation of morality, although they would agree that God commands us to do what is right. But they argue that it is God's nature that explains morality. Morality must somehow be rooted in the nature of things. God is the supreme reality and He is supremely good and loving: we therefore have an obligation to love and respect Him, as well as His creatures, especially His vicegerents who act as stewards and manage the earth as a trust.

Other ways of grounding morality in God are also possible. All would agree that the existence of moral obligations makes more sense in a universe in which the ultimate reality is a moral Being than it does in a universe where persons are a late and insignificant by-product of impersonal forces. Much of morality is simply a

1. See Adams, R. (1981), "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness", in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm, Oxford University Press, pp. 83-108.

The classical arguments for the existence of God are also discussed admirably well in the following:

Davies, B. (1993), *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press.

Vardy, P. (1995), *The Puzzle of God*, London: Harper Collins.

matter of respecting the worth and value of persons and that seems more reasonable in a universe that is ultimately "personal".

Like the other arguments we have considered, the moral argument is hardly rationally convincing to all. Obviously we have not shown conclusively that relativism is false or that it is impossible for the naturalist to give an explanation of moral obligations. But once more it seems that the moral argument does have force, at least for those who hold certain views in ethics.

It is also worthy of note that the conclusion of the argument once more complements the conclusion of the cosmological and teleological arguments. A God who provides the basis for moral obligations must be understood as a moral being, a being who cares deeply about the realisation of moral values. This is something that could hardly be inferred from the other two arguments.

Summing Up

In looking at these arguments, we have concluded that none of them can be judged to be a successful proof of God's existence in the sense that they are rationally convincing to everyone. Whether the arguments are rationally convincing to someone depends in each case on accepting some key premise or premises that are neither self-evident nor absolutely certain. On the other hand, we have found that there is much to be said for some of these debatable premises and that many people claim to know them to be true or at least see them as more reasonable than the alternatives. It would seem, then, that such arguments, individually and especially collectively, could form a case for the reasonableness of theism, at least relative to its rivals.

If these conclusions are correct, then this seems to me an important result. However, its importance should not be exaggerated. One huge limitation is that natural theology still leaves us a great deal to learn about God's nature and doings. A person who is content with the meagre knowledge of God gained thereby would be a person easily satisfied. A second limitation is that natural theology seems highly theoretical. It seems to lead only to beliefs *about God*, that is, propositional beliefs. On the basis of such argu-

ments one comes only to believe that a God exists but one does not thereby automatically acquire the kind of personal faith most religions value in speaking of faith *in God.*

And perhaps the biggest empirical attack against having a faith in God is the existence of evil in the world and its consequences, namely suffering. It is, therefore, to a discussion of this subject that we now turn.

Chapter 4
The Problem of Evil

> "The less he (God) allows men to bring about large scale horrors, the less the freedom and responsibility he gives them. [We are]... asking that God should make a toy world, a world where things matter, but not very much; where we can choose and our choices can make a small difference but the real choices remain God's. For he simply would not allow us the choice of doing real harm. . . He would be like an over-protective parent who will not let his child out of sight for a moment."
>
> Richard Swinburne: *The Existence of God*

Objections to belief in God posed by the occurrence of evil present a serious challenge to the religious believer. A distinction must be drawn, however, between the problem of evil as a philosophical *objection* to religious belief and the problem as a concerned *question*.

Some philosophers have put forward arguments from evil which purport to show that God does not exist or that belief in God is unreasonable. To such philosophical attacks, philosophical responses seem appropriate. However, many people – believers and non-believers – are bothered by evil. When they are faced with suffering on their own part or the part of others, they may pose an agonising "Why?". A philosophical argument is often the last thing such a person wants to hear; such an argument may appear irritatingly superficial. The person wants compassion and empathy, and the proper response may simply be to listen and try to share the other's grief and questions. At such times the problem of evil calls more for pastoral care than for philosophical debate.

The philosophical problem of evil can be posed briefly and sharply. It appears to many people, believers and non-believers alike, that a perfectly good, all-powerful being, if He exists, would

not allow the kind of evil and suffering that occurs in our world. Therefore, the existence of this evil seems to count heavily against the existence of God.

The underlying assumption of this argument is our intuition that a good being eliminates evil insofar as it is able to. God, being perfectly good, would presumably want to eliminate all evil; and since God is supposed to be omnipotent, He should be able to do just that. If there were a God (the argument concludes) one would not expect to find evil. Since one does find evil, and quite a bit of it, in our world, God must not exist.

The evils in the world that this argument takes as its basis are usually divided (by both theists and atheists) into two types – moral and natural. Moral evil is all the evil that is due to the actions of free, morally responsible beings. Murders, rapes and the hunger caused by social injustice would be examples of moral evil. Natural or non-moral evil is all the evil that does not appear to be due to the actions of morally responsible beings, such as the suffering caused by natural disasters and some diseases.

A distinction must also be made between two types of argument from evil. Some philosophers believe that the existence of evil constitutes a proof that God does not exist. In their view, the occurrence of evil and the existence of God are logically incompatible: it is a contradiction to claim that a perfectly good, all-powerful being exists and yet admit that evil occurs. Most philosophers today call this view the *logical form* of the problem of evil.

Other atheistic philosophers make a more modest claim. They are willing to admit that God's existence is logically compatible with the occurrence of evil. In other words, they concede that it is possible that a perfectly good, all-powerful being might have reasons for allowing evil. However, they allege that it is unlikely or improbable that God would to this. Hence (the occurrence of evil), though it does not prove that God does not exist, makes His existence unlikely or improbable. This line of argument is usually referred to as the *evidential form* of the problem of evil.

Theistic responses to these problems can also be divided into two types. The more ambitious type of response is a theodicy that attempts to *show* that God is justified in allowing evil. A theodicy tries to explain why God actually allows evil: it lays out the reasons

why God allows evil and tries to show that those reasons are good ones.

A more modest type of response than a theodicy, dubbed a *defence* by the philosopher Alvin Plantinga, tries to argue that God may have reasons for allowing evil that we don't or can't know. The defence does not try to explain why God actually allows evil, but argues that it is reasonable to believe that God has reasons, even if we don't know what they are. A defence may give various explanations as *possible* reasons why God might allow evil without necessarily claiming that those reasons are God's actual ones.

Certain ways of resolving the problem of evil are not genuine options for the traditional theist. One way is simply to deny the reality of evil, to view evil as an illusion. Such a view must still face the problem of the evil of the illusory belief in evil! Aside from this difficulty, however, such a view is simply not consistent with Islam, Judaism and Christianity, which take evil as something that is all too real and which must be treated with great seriousness.

Another way of resolving the problem has been to regard God as limited in either power or goodness, or both. Perhaps evil is due to a recalcitrant material that God is doing His best to straighten out. This unconventional view has been asserted by various process theologians. Such "finite theisms" hold a position that represents a major modification of traditional theism. Indeed, another option suggested is that evil may be due to some recalcitrant streak in God's own character, which He is still trying to tame. It is clear that such unorthodox ideas conflict with essential elements of the great theistic religions. Before accepting some such view, it is wise in my judgement to see whether traditional theism has within it the resources to solve the problem of evil.

The Logical Form of the Problem

One of the better-known statements of the logical form of the problem of evil comes from the contemporary philosopher J.L. Mackie. Mackie states the problem this way: It is contradictory to affirm that God exists and is wholly good and omnipotent, and yet

to admit that evil exists.[1] Mackie admits that the contradiction is not immediately obvious: to show it, he says, some additional premises must be added, which spell out the meaning of terms like "good" and "evil" and "omnipotent".

> "These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the proposition that a good omnipotent thing exists and that evil exists, are incompatible."[2]

Mackie is claiming that the proposition "God exists" and his additional premises logically imply that evil does not exist, which obviously contradicts the proposition that evil does exist.

Theistic responses to Mackie's argument (and other similar arguments) have centred around Mackie's claim that a good being would always eliminate evil as far as it can. There seem to be quite a few circumstances in which a good being allows evil that could be eliminated to occur, because eliminating the evil would also eliminate a good which is great enough to "outweigh" the evil that is allowed. For example, a heroic soldier might fall on a live grenade to save his comrades. His death is surely an evil, yet his action in bringing about this evil is nonetheless the action of a good person. Perhaps by diving into a trench the soldier could save his own life and prevent that evil but to do so would result in a greater evil. So the good that is brought about by his action outweighs the evil.

So it does not seem to be true that a good being always eliminates evil as far as it can. What is true, perhaps, is that a good being always eliminates evil as far as it can without the loss of a greater good or the occurrence of a greater evil. Almost all theodicies base their arguments on this sort of "greater good" principle.

1. Mackie, J.L. (1973) "Evil and Omnipotence", in Rowe and Wainwright, eds, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, New York: Harcourt Brace, p. 206.

2. Ibid., p.207.

The evil that God permits is justified because allowing that evil allows for the achievement of a greater good or the prevention of a greater evil.

The critic is likely to object at this point that an omnipotent being must be able to eliminate evil completely without any net loss of good or increase of evil. For, unlike our heroic soldier, an omnipotent being is supposed to be able to do anything.

The response to this has traditionally been that not even an omnipotent being can do literally anything. One limitation on omnipotence that has generally been accepted by theists is that not even God can do what is logically impossible. An omnipotent being cannot make a square circle or create a person who is not a person, because these contradictory notions are not genuine possibilities. It seems plausible that the possibility or actuality of some evils is logically necessary if certain goods are to be achieved.

Various kinds of goods and evils have been claimed to be related in this way, giving rise to various types of theodicies. For example, certain kinds of moral virtues seem logically to require certain evils. Physical courage seems inconceivable without the possibility of physical pain. Perhaps some of the "first order" evils in the world, particularly the natural evils, are necessary obstacles that must exist in order for human beings to cultivate certain "second-order" virtues. This might be termed a "soul-making" theodicy.

A soul-making theodicy is not without its problems, however. One problem is that not all natural evils seem to contribute to any worthwhile good – the suffering of animals, for example. A second problem is that in addition to making possible second-order goods such as courage, first-order evils such as pain also make possible second-order evils, such as cowardice. It is therefore not clear that allowing such evils clearly leads to a greater good.

Most theists respond to this last problem by incorporating a soul-making theodicy into another kind of theodicy, the free-will theodicy. The reason that second-order evils, such as cowardice occur, as well as much other evil is that human beings make bad use of their freedom. The resulting evil is due to human desire, not God.

But why should God give humans free will and why should He allow them to use it so badly? Traditionally, God is said to allow

freedom because without it humans could not be morally responsible agents, capable of freely doing good by responding to and loving their Creator. In creating human beings, God desired to make creatures who would freely love and serve Him. The "love" of a robot who can do nothing else is not worth much. True freedom involves great risk but also the possibility of great good that can be achieved in no other way.

But why couldn't God give humans free will and guarantee that they would use their freedom wisely? The reply to this is that it simply is not logically possible for God to do this. In the sense of freedom that is required for moral responsibility, a person who is free to do action A is also free not to do A. If God guaranteed that a person in a certain situation would only do A, then that person simply would not be free with respect to A in that situation. It is logically possible for God to create free beings who always choose to do right, but it is not logically possible for God to create free beings who *inevitably* do right. If God creates beings who are truly free, then whatever they do is at least sometimes up to them and not to God.

There are, no doubt, difficulties for such a free-will theodicy. Obviously, such a theodicy is no more valid than the underlying theory of free will it embodies. The free-will question is a vexed one that we cannot hope to resolve here.[1] Another difficulty is that the free-will theodicy appears to account for only moral evil. To account for natural evil, the free-will argument would have to be extended in one of two ways. One way would be to see natural evil as the work of superhuman free beings such as Satan/Shaytan. This thinking converts natural evil into moral evil, perhaps by interpreting it as a divine judgement on a fallen people. There is Qur'anic support for the idea that this is how some communities (the tribes of 'Ad, Thamud and Madyan, for example) met their end.[2]

1. See Chapter Two of William Hasker's *Metaphysics* (Intervarsity Press, 1983) for a good discussion of this issue and defence of free will.

2. A substantial section of *Surah Al-A'raf* (The Heights, Chapter 7) is devoted to the consequences of the active disbelief and resistance which the people of Noah, Salih, Lot and Shu'ayb showed when the prophets of their communities brought the divine message to them. See in particular verses 59-93.

Critics of theism will certainly question how one can know that natural evil should be viewed in such away. I think it must be admitted that as full-fledged theodicies neither free-will arguments alone, nor such arguments taken in conjunction with a soul-making argument, are totally convincing. When all is said and done, it is difficult for the theist to be confident that he truly understands why God allows all the evil that does occur.

Significantly, however, to rebut the logical form of the problem of evil it is not necessary, in my judgement, to have a full-fledged theodicy. For the charge of the atheist in this case is that theism is self-contradictory. To rebut this charge it is not necessary to know God's actual reasons for allowing evil or to be able to explain why God allows the evils He does. It is sufficient to know that there are *possible* reasons why an all-good, omnipotent being might allow evil if one wishes to show that the occurrence of evil and the existence of God are not *logically* contradictory. The charge of contradiction that Mackie and others bring is a strong one and the burden of proof is on them to show exactly what the contradiction is. No one, to my knowledge, has so far been able to do this.

As theodicies, the soul-making and free-will arguments may have their limitations but their value in producing a *defence* against the logical form of the problem of evil may still be great. The free-will argument, for example, shows that it is not necessarily correct to say that a good being always eliminates all the evil it can, or that an omnipotent being could eliminate all evil without the loss of any greater good. Yet in order to show that theism is self-contradictory, some such premises as these must necessarily be true.

The Evidential Form of the Problem

Many atheists at this point retreat to a weaker position but one that is nonetheless potentially damaging to the theist. They admit that theism is logically consistent and that the existence of evil does not in itself disprove the existence of God. The charge they make is that the occurrence of evil constitutes powerful evidence against God's existence. Evil, or at least the amounts of evil and

kinds of evil that occur in our world, provide us with good reasons (claims the atheist) for not believing in God.

The evidential form of the problem of evil can best be understood as a response to the "greater good" theodicies sketched in the last section. In this case, the atheist admits that it is possible for a good, omnipotent being to allow evil if by so doing a greater good is achieved. So the mere existence of evil does not contradict God's existence. However, the atheist will urge that much of the actual evil that we observe in the world is pointless: it does not appear to lead to any greater good. A good God would surely not allow that sort of evil. The argument can be summarised as follows:

1. If God exists, He does not allow any utterly pointless evil.
2. Probably, there is pointless evil.
3. Probably, God does not exist.

In responding to the evidential form of the problem, the theist can once more rely on the theodicies we examined in the last section, as well as others that have been proposed.[1] But suppose he/she does not find any or all of these arguments convincing (as some young Muslims now increasingly do)? It must not be forgotten that evil is a problem felt by the believer as well as the non-believer. Many believers find the occurrence of many evils in the world baffling and troubling. They wonder why God allows these things for they may appear to them, on occasion, to be pointless. What can the believer say?

At this point the value of the defence, as opposed to a theodicy, becomes evident. For what the believer can say at this point is that he believes God has reasons for allowing evil, even if he does not know what these reasons are. What evidence does the believer have to back up this claim? The evidence here must simply be his evidence for God's existence and goodness. If the believer has good reasons to believe in a good God, then he also has a reason to believe that God has reasons for allowing evil. The following argument is just as *valid* as the atheistic argument just stated:

1. For a somewhat novel response to the problem of evil, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, (Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 141-42.

1. If God exists, He does not allow any utterly pointless evil.
2. God exists.
3. Therefore there is no utterly pointless evil.

Which argument is to be preferred here?

The answer requires that an individual make a judgement about his total evidential situation. The existence of evil *is* a problem for the theist/believer. In the judgement of many people in this new century it does "count against" the existence of God. The question at issue, however, is whether this negative evidence is sufficient to count decisively against God's existence. If one has strong reasons for believing in God and for believing Him good, then evil will be regarded as a difficulty, since one does not understand why God allows evil, but not as a decisive difficulty. After all, it is hard to see how finite human beings, with our imperfect and selective understanding of the ultimate meaning and pattern of the universe, could claim to know that any evil is utterly pointless. If through religious experience and revelation one had come to know God as a loving, good being, one would have powerful evidence that God must have reasons for allowing evil, even if we do not know what those reasons are.

It is, in fact, in just this sort of situation that faith is called for. If the faith is to be reasonable, of course, there must be some basis for belief in God. But adherents of a religion normally claim to have evidence of this type. For example, Muslims usually cite the inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an as providing them with knowledge of God and God's character:

> *"This is the Book: in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah; who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in prayer; and spend out of what We have provided for them; and who believe in the Revelation sent to thee (Muhammad) and sent before thy time, and (in their hearts) have the assurance of the Hereafter. They are on (true guidance) from their Lord, and it is these who will prosper."*[1]

1. The Qur'an 2:2-5.

Evil, then, is a serious problem for the theist but it is not necessarily an insurmountable one. If the theist has good reasons for believing in God, then he also has good reasons for believing that God is justified in permitting evil. In that case the occurrence of evil is seen as a test of one's faith in God.

To the atheist, evil constitutes strong evidence against God's existence. From a theistic perspective, however, the person who doubts God because of the occurrence of evil needs one of two things. If he does not know God and God's goodness, he needs through experience to come to know God or come to know God in a fuller way. If he already knows God and His goodness, then he needs pastoral encouragement that will help him persevere in his faith:

> *"All that is on earth will perish, but will abide (forever) the Face of thy Lord - full of Majesty Bounty and Honour: Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?"*[1]

1. The Qur'an 55:26-28.

As an excellent introduction to the Problem of Evil, see Vardy, P. (1992), *The Puzzle of Evil*, London: Harper Collins.

Chapter 5
Talking about God: the Problem of Religious Language

> "Anyone uttering a sentence must know under what conditions he calls it true and under what conditions he calls it false. If he is unable to state these conditions, he does not know what he has said. A statement which cannot be conclusively verified cannot be verified at all. It is simply devoid of any meaning."
>
> (Friedrich Waismann, "Logische Analyse des Wahrsheinlichkeitsbegriffs", *Erkenntnis*, 1 (1930-1))

In the last chapter we examined a principal argument against the reasonableness of religious belief – the problem of evil. This argument – and others like it – purport to show that God can be proved not to exist or that His existence is implausible or unlikely. They represent the traditional way of supporting belief in atheism or agnosticism.

In the early part of the twentieth century a new type of challenge arose for religious believers. This new challenge was directed against the *meaningfulness* of belief in God. The claim was that propositions like "God exists" or "There is a life after death" are cognitively meaningless: they lack any clear sense. It's not that we lack evidence that God exists but that we do not even know what it means to say that God exists. This is the problem of religious language.

The Challenge of Logical Positivism

The charge that religious beliefs are cognitively meaningless was first made by philosophers known as logical positivists. Although logical positivism originated with a group of philosophers in Vienna, who, after World War I, formed the "Vienna Circle", it became known to English-speaking readers mainly through A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, first published in 1936.

The heart of logical positivism and the basis of its attacks on the meaningfulness of religious belief was the verifiability theory of meaning. This theory was an attempt to specify the conditions under which a proposition is meaningful. According to this theory there are two types of meaningful statements: analytic propositions are those statements whose truth or falsehood is determined by the meanings of the words in the statement. According to the positivists these would include definitions and truths of mathematics and logic. All non-analytic meaningful statements are *synthetic*. All synthetic propositions must be empirically verifiable by some set of sense experiences.

In the positivist view, analytic statements do not give us any information about extra-linguistic realities, since they are solely about language. To give information about reality, or "matters of fact", a proposition must be synthetic and therefore must be empirically verifiable. Since many theological statements purport to give information about God, who is supposed to be more than a linguistic reality, these statements must be empirically verifiable to be meaningful. The positivists claimed that theological assertions were not verifiable and that such statements were therefore cognitively meaningless.

According to Ayer, the positivist view rules out not only theism but also atheism and agnosticism: if "God exists" is meaningless, it can be neither affirmed nor denied nor even proposed as a possibility whose truth is not ascertainable.[1] However, in a more extended sense, positivism certainly leads to atheism if by an atheist we mean someone who declares it is unreasonable to believe in God or even seriously to consider belief as a possibility.

1. Ayer, A.J. (19), *Language, Truth and Logic.*

Although logical positivism was popular for a period in Anglo-American philosophy and although some of its characteristic themes continue to surface in other forms (as we shall see), it has not survived as a philosophical movement in its original form. Several powerful objections have been raised against the verifiability theory of meaning.

First it is not clear that the verifiability theory can pass its own test as a meaningful statement. The theory certainly does not seem to be empirically verifiable, so its proponents must take it as an analytic statement, a statement about the meaning of "meaning". However, most people do not use "meaning" in the way positivists wish to, so as a dictionary definition the theory is probably false. The only option for the positivist is to propose his theory as a reform, a new stipulation as to the meaning of "meaning". But why should the theist accept this new proposal, with its devastating consequences for religious belief?

Other problems beset the verifiability theory which may be even more serious. Foremost among these is clarifying the notion of "verification". Positivism is a form of empiricism, the philosophy that wishes to ground all knowledge in experience. The positivist is suspicious of what cannot be directly seen, touched, felt and so on. As originally developed, therefore, the positivists interpreted verification to be direct sensory verification.

The claim that all meaningful synthetic statements must be directly verifiable led to problems, however, for many of the entities postulated by the natural sciences are not directly observable. Quarks and black holes are contemporary examples. Yet logical positivists did not wish their theory of meaning to imply that scientific assertions are meaningless. To prevent this from occurring, the theory was weakened to allow that a statement was meaningful if it could be verified indirectly. Furthermore, the positivists admitted that the verification did not have to be conclusive, since general statements, such as scientific laws, can never be proved to be true by any finite set of observations, and that even this indirect, inconclusive verification had to be possible only in principle. When weakened in these ways, the theory conceded that religious statements (and indeed just about all statements) can be cognitively meaningful.

Various attempts were made to tighten up the principle to exclude religious statements, but these tightened versions once more were found to exclude scientific statements as well. No one, in fact, has been able to state a version of the verifiability theory liberal enough to allow meaning to science and at the same time restrictive enough to rule out religious beliefs.[1] Thus, although a few well-known philosophers, such as Kai Nelson, still maintain that religious beliefs are cognitively meaningless because they are not empirically verifiable, it is hard to see why religious believers should regard such accusations with much concern.[2]

Are Religious Beliefs Falslifiable?

In the 1950s a debate about the meaningfulness of religious language was provoked by Anthony Flew. Flew borrowed a parable from another philosopher to explain why he believed religious assertions were not cognitively meaningful.

> "Once upon a time, two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'Some gardener must tend this plot.' The other disagrees, 'There is no gardener.' So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardener', so they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds... But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric

1. For discussions of the many attempts (and failures) to develop a plausible version of the verifiability theory, see Carl G. Hempel, "The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning", reprinted in *Logical Positivism* ed A.J. Ayer (1959; reprinted Greenwood Press, 1978). Also: Plantinga, A (1967) *God and Other Minds*, Comell University Press.

2. See Nielsen, K. (1982) *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, New York: St. Martin's Press, esp. Chapter 6.

> shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last the sceptic despairs, 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?'[1]

Flew goes on to claim that "sophisticated religious believers" are similar to the believers in the parable in that they do not admit that any conceivable event or series of events would provide us with a sufficient reason for admitting that propositions like "God loves us" or "God exists" are false. Religious believers assert that God loves us, yet all kinds of horrible disasters are allowed by God to occur, events that a loving God presumably could and would prevent. Such events do not falsify the claim that "God loves us". Instead, the believer qualifies or weakens the claim by adding that God's love is inscrutable or mysterious. At this point Flew wonders whether the original assertion is still meaningful or whether, like the claim of the believer in the parable, it has "died the death of a thousand qualifications". In other words, Flew challenges the believer to specify what would count as a falsification of his religious claims; and he argues that if nothing could falsify those claims, then the claims are vacuous.

Flew's challenge appears to differ from the logical positivist view in two ways. First, Flew speaks of falsification rather than verification. Second, he roots his challenge, not in a dubious general theory, but in the basic insight that to assert something is to deny something else. An assertion that does not rule out anything, but rather is compatible with any conceivable state of affairs, does not appear to assert anything either.

The differences may be more apparent than substantive, however. Suppose the believer responded to Flew's challenge by saying that theological assertions are certainly not compatible with just anything. "God exists", for example, would be falsified by God's not existing. If God hated us that would falsify, "God loves us".

1. Anthony Flew and others (1964), "Theology and Falsification", in Flew and MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, New York: Macmillan, p.96.

Flew would almost certainly not accept this as a response to his challenge, because he would probably regard these assertions as equally "metaphysical" and meaningless. What Flew really wants is some set of empirically observable conditions that would falsify theological assertions. If this is correct, then Flew's challenge seems to presuppose something like a verificationist theory of meaning, at least in one of its weaker versions. If so, and this verificationist theory is suspect, it does not seem that it would be a fatal blow if religious beliefs failed to meet Flew's challenge.

Though it is not obvious that religious beliefs must be empirically falsifiable in Flew's sense, it would be damaging if religious beliefs turned out to have no empirical consequences, or if experience were simply irrelevant to such beliefs. For this reason it is worthwhile to examine a few attempts to meet Flew's challenge. One of the first respondents to Flew was R.M. Hare, who conceded that Flew was basically right about the falsifiability of religious beliefs but wrong about the implications of this. As Hare saw it, religious beliefs are not really cognitive assertions because they are not falsifiable. Nevertheless, they are meaningful and important.

Hare interprets religious beliefs as *bliks*, a term he coined. Hare explains a blik by his own parable:

> "A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find and, after each of them has retired, they say, 'You see, he doesn't really want to murder you, he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?' But the lunatic replies, 'Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them.'[1]

As Hare sees it, bliks are like unfalsifiable convictions; they are not assertions, therefore, but it is nevertheless important to have the "right" blik, presumably because of the impact bliks have on our conduct.

The concept of a blik is introduced through the example of a lunatic, but sane people also have bliks. For example, all normal

1. Hare, R.M. in ibid., pp. 99-100.

people are convinced that our past experience is a good guide to the future. Religious beliefs are a different kind of blik – not insane, but not universally shared either.

While a provocative notion, Hare's concept of bliks ultimately does not seem coherent to me. Hare says that bliks are not assertions but he also talks about bliks being right or wrong. He fails to explain how non-assertions can be right or wrong.

I suspect Hare's proposal is an inconsistent mix of two different responses to Flew. His notion of a blik bears some resemblance to the concept of an "ultimate presupposition", developed by R.G. Collingwood and others. An ultimate presupposition is a fundamental metaphysical conviction that is used as a basis for interpreting all of one's experiences. Such presuppositions are not falsifiable precisely because they are ultimate. Such presuppositions are cognitive, however. To go this route, Hare would have to reject the verificationist thesis that an unfalsifiable statement is always cognitively meaningless.

The other response that Hare was perhaps developing with his notion of bliks is the non-cognitive view of religious assertions. Empiricist philosophers such as R. B. Braithwaite have accepted Flew's conclusion that religious statements are not cognitive assertions but have then gone on to argue that they may be non-cognitively meaningful because of their practical value.[1] To put it simply, a proposition such as "God is love", rather than asserting a transcendent metaphysical reality, may be a disguised imperative or a piece of moral guidance. Perhaps it is equivalent to something like "A person ought to regard love as the most important thing in life". This non-cognitive theory rejects as improper, questions about whether religious statements are factually true: religion is here reduced to a "way of life", with the traditional beliefs that were a part of that way of life transformed into "myths", "symbols" or "illustrative parables". As Braithwaite sees it, it is the use of such parables and stories in religions that differentiates religion from mere morality. The illustrative elements are important, therefore, but it is not important whether or not the stories are literally true.

1. Braithwaite, R.B., "An Empiricists's View of the Nature of Religious Beliefs", reprinted in Hick, *Existence of God*, pp. 229-52.

In my judgement, Basil Mitchell's response to Flew[1] seems much closer to the way religious people typically regard their faith than does Hare's blik proposal. Essentially, Mitchell argues that religious beliefs are assertions and that they are falsifiable in principle. Believers are not, however, able to say precisely what would count as a falsification, which implies that in practice we may not be able to say with certainty whether such beliefs have been falsified.

Mitchell explains his view with a parable as well.[2] In an occupied country during a war, a resistance fighter meets a mysterious stranger and spends a night in earnest conversation. The stranger tells the fighter that he is on the side of the resistance, even in command of it, and he begs him to have faith in him no matter what happens. The stranger is hereafter seen only from a distance, sometimes doing things that obviously help the resistance, sometimes doing things that appear to betray it. How long should the resistance fighter maintain his faith in the stranger? Mitchell does not think it possible to say precisely when such faith becomes unreasonable.

It is not that the apparently unfriendly acts of the stranger do not count as evidence against his faithfulness. The question is whether those acts should be allowed to count *decisively* against the favourable evidence, buttressed as it is by one's faith in the stranger. The resistance fighter has a choice between concluding that the stranger is not really on his side or concluding that he is on his side but has reasons for sometimes behaving strangely. Both assertions are clearly meaningful but it is not always clear when the evidence is sufficient to rule one alternative out.

In a similar way, Mitchell argues, some things count against God's existence or His loving us – unexplained evil and suffering, for example (see Chapter 4). For the believer, however, these things do not count decisively, for he believes that he has sufficient evidence for God's reality and goodness. Believing that God is good, he concludes that God has reasons for His actions, even if we do not know what those reasons are. Thus, for Mitchell, reli-

1. Mitchell, B., "Theology and Falsification", in Flew and MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*.

2. Ibid., pp. 103-5.

gious beliefs in principle are open to empirical disconfirmation and are thus meaningful, even if we cannot say precisely how much contrary evidence would suffice to disconfirm them.

Language Games

It is one thing to rebut the arguments of Flew and others and to argue that religious statements are meaningful. It is quite another thing to actually analyse such statements and discern just how they are meaningful. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to this core positive task. Some promising suggestions as to how this should be done can 'be found in the later writings of the early twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In his early work, Wittgenstein thought of language as primarily serving the function of "stating facts" and he identified "meaning" with "factual meaning", much as did the positivists. In his later work, Wittgenstein recognises that this view of language was unduly narrow:

> "But how many kinds of sentences are there? ... There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten."[1]

Wittgenstein uses the term "language game" to emphasise the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity or of a form of life.[2] Language is used in countless ways and there are as many kinds of meaning as there are kinds of uses of language. Wittgenstein, in fact, enjoined his followers, "Don't look for the meaning; look for the use."

This concept of "language games" and the correlative concept of "forms of life" are significant themes in Wittgenstein's view of

1. Wittgenstein, L. (1948) *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: Macmillan, p. 11e, (italics his).

2.. Ibid., (italics his).

language. Although Wittgenstein never developed these concepts in a precise manner, they have been fertile and suggestive. To really understand the use of a word, says Wittgenstein, one must understand it in its context. Various "games" are played with language: the language game of mathematics differs greatly from that of cricket, for instance. Each has its own characteristic vocabulary and "rules", which are usually not explicitly learned but are embedded in the shared practices of the respective linguistic community.

The last point highlights the connection between language games and forms of life. To understand the use of a word, we must understand it not only in its linguistic context but in its larger, "real life" pragmatic context. We must not only understand how to use a term grammatically but also in what situations and for what purposes a language game is played. Thus, for Wittgenstein, to imagine a language is ultimately to imagine a form of life.

It is not surprising that these Wittgensteinian themes should have been applied to religious language, which certainly seems to be a distinctive language game embedded in an equally distinctive form of life. It is now generally conceded that the analysis of religious language must at least begin from an insider's perspective, one that takes into account the actual uses to which the language is put in the context of the religious community.

Aquinas' Doctrine of Analogy

Philosophers in the twenty-first century are not the first to grapple with the question of religious language. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas developed a sophisticated and influential theory. According to Aquinas, when we speak about God we inevitably must use language originally developed for finite creatures. Such language cannot be used to apply to God precisely in its original sense.

When we speak about God, we do not speak univocally, which is to use the same term in precisely the same sense; nor do we speak equivocally, which is to use the same term in two unrelated senses, as when one uses the term race to refer to an athletic con-

test on one occasion and an ethnically related group of human beings on another. Rather, talk about God is analogical, which is to use the same term in a similar or related sense.[1] One might, for example, call both a dog and a person faithful. In this case, there is a resemblance between a faithful person and a faithful dog: the term is not being used equivocally. Nevertheless, faithfulness in a person is not identical with faithfulness in a dog.

Aquinas defines two major types of analogy. The *analogy of attribution* uses a term originally employed for one thing for a second thing because of a causal relation between the two things. Thus, one calls a certain geographical location "healthy" because it causes the people who live there to be healthy, and one calls a rosy complexion "healthy" because it is the effect of a healthy body. Religious people use terms like "living" and "loving" to refer to God because He is the cause of life and love in His creation.

The other type of analogy is the *analogy of proportionality*. Here a term is employed to refer to something proportionately to the kind of reality the thing possesses. A dog is brave in the way dogs can be brave in proportion to its reality as a dog. A human being's bravery is proportionately richer because his nature is richer. God is loving, holy and powerful but He possesses all these qualities in proportion to His infinite nature; human love, holiness and power resemble but fall far short of these qualities in God.

> *"He is Allah, there is no God other than He ... The Holy One, Peace, the Guardian, the Majestic, the Compeller, the Superb. Glorified be He over all that they ascribe unto Him."*[2]

The analogy theory is often criticised on the grounds that one must be able to reformulate an analogy in literal, univocal language for the analogy to be meaningful. Unless we know precisely how God's love resembles human love, so the argument goes, we do not really know what it means to say, "God is loving". But to know how God's love resembles human love, we must know what that love is like and be able to describe it univocally.[1]

1. Aquinas's theory is developed in Part 1, Question 13, of his *Summa Theologia*.

2. Qur'an 59:23.

Whether this objection is sound is controversial. However, it seems to me that all this objection really establishes, if one is inclined to accept it, is that it must be possible, in principle, to replace analogous language with univocal language, not that the replacement must be actually carried out for analogous language to have meaning. If an analogy is valid, then a person who has sufficient knowledge, and has a language sufficiently rich, should be able to describe the analogous relationship in a direct fashion. However, it is surely too strong to claim that analogous language is meaningless unless it can be "cashed in" with univocal language. If that were the case, what need would we have for analogous language? Analogies would be proper in that case only where they were unnecessary. Surely the uses of analogy, metaphor and other non-univocal discourse in poetry, and even in scientific model-building,[2] show that such language is useful and meaningful, even where we are not yet able to dispense with such language, and perhaps even if we are not able to do this at all.

The objection may also presuppose on overly wooden view of "literal" language and an overly sharp dichotomy between such language and the language of analogy. Many ordinary, literal terms begin their careers as metaphors. It is hard to see how language could creatively develop and new concepts be originated if a non-literal usage were always meaningless until it could be replaced by a more literal statement.

It is true that Aquinas's analogy theory implies that we lack a precise and clear understanding of God and His characteristics. We only know God as the being who resembles, though surpasses, what we humans know as "love", "power", "holiness" and so on. However, it is quite in keeping with ordinary religious belief to claim that God is in some ways essentially mysterious. Our knowl-

1. For a brief example of such an argument, see Blackstone, W, (1963) *The Problem of Religious Knowledge*, New York: Prentice-Hall, pp. 121-22.

2. For interesting treatments of scientific models, pointing out implications for theological discourse, see Ramsey, I.T. (1974) *Models and Mystery*, London: Oxford University Press. See also Poole, M. (1995) *Beliefs and Values in Science Education*, Open University Press, pp. 49-64. and Reiss, M. (1993) *Science Education for a Pluralist Society*, Buckingham: Open University Press, pp.17-28.

edge of God is not supposed to be theoretically and scientifically precise; it has an essentially practical purpose. It may be sufficient for human beings, if they have enough understanding of God, to know how to relate to Him properly. If it turns out that humans, in this life at least, lack any knowledge of God's existence, as Aquinas claims, this will not faze the believer, so long as he has enough of an idea of God to know how to worship and serve him properly.

> *"Say: All my prayers and my sacrifices, my living and my dying, are for Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. He has no partner, and I am the first of those to submit unto Him".*[1]

In conclusion, one can say that no theory of religious language has yet emerged that has won general acceptance and perhaps none ever will. However, it should now be clear that religious language is an extremely complicated phenomenon, serving many purposes and functioning in many different contexts. It seems plausible, therefore, that any adequate theory will have to be a complex one, which recognises this variety.

1.Qur'an 6:162-3.

Chapter 6
Objections to Theism from Science and Postmodernity

> "Historically, the unstopped flow of science gives us reason to believe that it is omnicompetent... That science limits its domain of discourse is a manifestation of its honesty and the springboard of its success. It does not mean that science has rejected any domains of enquiry from its method; their time will come. Science's cautious, publicly monitored gnawing at the cosmic bun is a far more honest approach to universal competence than religion's universal but empty gulping and the verbal flatulence that passes for theistic exposition."[1]

Many writers approach the question of religious belief today in a thoroughly sociological manner. There is a widespread conviction that we live in an increasingly secularised society and that a trend toward secularisation inevitably goes hand in hand with the development of a modern, post-industrial information society. There is much talk about whether it is possible for "post-modern man" or "twenty-first century man" to believe in God or other supernatural beings in the traditional sense. For example, Richard Dawkins, professor of zoology at Oxford University, says:

> "Growing up in the universe... also means growing out of parochial and supernatural views of the universe, growing up to a proper scientific understanding of the universe, based upon evidence – public argument – rather than authority or tradition or private revelation. Growing up means trying to understand how the universe works, not

1. Peter Atkins (1992) in "Will Science Ever Fail?" New Scientist, 1833, 8 August, pp. 33 ff.

> copping out with superstitious ideas that only seem to explain things but actually explain nothing."[1]

Such thinking raises for religious belief what might be called the problem of post-modernity. To use the words of William James, is religious belief a "live option" for educated, reflective people in this new century?

Post-Modernity and Religious Belief

Certainly there has been a decline in the percentage of religious believers in Western industrialised countries, at least among intellectuals and particularly in Western Europe. The theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) wrote that, "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."[2] This, surely, is a wild exaggeration. Many sophisticated people do continue to believe in spirits and miracles. Indeed, some of these believers are scientist and physicians; some are even philosophers.

Perhaps Bultmann's real point is not a psychological or sociological claim about what it is possible or impossible to believe but rather a claim that certain features of the modern world, particularly scientific knowledge, make traditional religious belief irrational. If so, the arguments should be put on the table for rational examination. Later in this chapter we will look at some arguments that purport to do this. If scientific knowledge in some way undermines the reasonableness of religious belief, it is crucial to know this. However, glib generalisations about how scientific knowledge is incompatible with religious faith will not do; the specific features of science that count as objections must be explained and it must be shown just how these features make religious belief untenable.

1. Dawkins, R. (1 991) *Growing Up in the* Universe, BBC Study Guide to the Christmas Lectures at the Royal Society, London: BBC Education.

2. Bultmann, R et. al, (1967) *Kerygma and Myth*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 5.

The fact that religious belief has declined among educated people in the twentieth – now the twenty-first – century, if correct, is an interesting fact and no doubt worth some reflection. Many possible explanations of such a fact are plausible, especially given the emotional nature of religious faith and its implications for one's personal life. It would be extremely rash to conclude from such a fact that religious belief is necessarily irrational. And such a sociological fact must be balanced by other interesting sociological facts, such as the amazing persistence of religious faith in China and the former Soviet Union (particularly Islam and Christianity), persistence in the face of repeated attempts by totalitarian governments to extinguish it. In general, deciding the reasonableness of belief in God on the basis of such sociological facts is like deciding whom to vote for in an election on the basis of who is leading in the public opinion polls. In both cases, one has abdicated one's personal responsibility to ascertain what is true or best in favour of the anonymous authority of what existential writers like to call "the crowd". Certainly historians and sociologists should continue to explore post-modernity and its causes and implications but it is a mistake to think that such studies will answer such basic human questions as whether God exists. Indeed, in the current climate, it would seem to be a good thing if theologians and others would cease to utter judgements about what "post-modern man" can believe, and think instead more deeply about what modern human beings *should* believe. Such sociological pronouncements are a distraction from the pressing task of examining the serious objections to religious belief that have been made.

Do the Natural Sciences Undermine Religious Belief?

In examining the difficulties the sciences allegedly pose for religious belief, it is helpful to distinguish problems stemming from the natural sciences from those stemming from the social sciences. The idea that the development and growth of the natural sciences constitutes a difficulty for the religious believer is rather

widespread, despite the fact that many of the greatest natural scientists believe in God. What, exactly, are these difficulties?

Some are hardly worth considering. For example, some purport to find a problem in the vastness of the universe and in the relative spatial insignificance of the earth. It seems hasty to estimate spiritual significance purely on the basis of physical size. The earth may turn out to be a pretty important place when all is said and done. In any case, since most religious believers regard God as the Creator of the whole universe, the immensity of that universe can only add to our impression of the Creator's greatness. It is perfectly consistent with theism to believe that God may have created other beings in other parts of the universe and, for all we know, God may be just as concerned with such beings as we earth people think He is with us.

A somewhat more troubling problem is the idea that the success of natural science as an explanation of the universe has made the "God hypothesis" superfluous or even downright false. In this view, theology and science are competing theories that try to explain natural events. The success of natural science then "crowds out" theological explanations. An idea similar to this is prominent in nineteenth-century philosopher and sociologist, Auguste Comte's description of the history of science. In Comte's view it is characteristic of a primitive society to give theological explanations of phenomena: "It thunders because Thor throws his hammer". As science matures, such explanations are replaced by mechanistic ones involving natural regularities.

Comte's view is open to challenge on several counts. For one thing, Comte has confused theology with mythology. Thor's hammer seems to be an instance of the latter and there are great differences between such mythology and the theology of the great world religions. For another, Comte fails to see that magic would be a better candidate as historical ancestor of modern science than either mythology or theology. But the most serious objection to Comte is that he misconstrues the nature of a theological explanation.

Though believers have sometimes understood God's activity as an immediate explanation for natural phenomena (particularly in the case of miracles), it does not appear that religion and science

usually give competing explanations on the same level for ordinary events. Natural science pushes further and further in its explanatory quest but the claim that its explanations are ultimate and final does not seem to be a testable scientific claim.[1] Science tries to describe the structures and processes of nature. The question as to whether there is anything more ultimate than nature that explains nature itself, with its processes and structures, is one that cannot be answered by science itself – which is not to say that scientific knowledge might not be relevant in answering such a question.

Theology, on the other hand, is not interested directly in the processes of nature. Theology sees the laws of nature as descriptions of the orderly processes that God instituted and maintains. Theology tries to answer the question of why nature exists at all, and why nature has the orderly characteristics that science investigates. Science and theology do not, therefore, seem to be essential rivals, because the explanations they offer are not of the same type or on the same level. Science tries to tell us what goes on and how it goes on. Theology tries to tell us why the whole thing goes on and who stands behind it.

This is not to say *particular* theological doctrines could not conflict with *particular* scientific theories. For example, the steady-state cosmological theory, though compatible with theism in general, would appear to conflict with the views of many monotheists that the universe had a beginning. (For this reason many monotheists are happy that the Big Bang theory has overwhelming support in the scientific community.) Such clashes between science and religion seem real possibilities but they do not appear inevitable. When clashes occur, it would seem possible for the conflicts to be peacefully resolved by one or both parties adjusting their position, as happened in the past.

The success of the natural sciences has undoubtedly encouraged naturalists to think that nature exists "on its own" and that

1. See Poole, M. (1995) *Beliefs and Values in Science Education*, Buckingham: Open University Press, for an analysis of the compatibility of different types of explanation (esp.pp.84-5).

2. For a comprehensive discussion of science and religious belief, see my (2000) book *An Exploration of the Limits of Modern Science*, London: IQRA Trust.

nothing beyond a scientific explanation is necessary.[2] Whether the naturalist is right here essentially depends on whether it is reasonable to look for an explanation of the contingency of the universe and its beneficial order. These issues were discussed in connection with the cosmological and theological arguments and the reader who is interested in pursuing them further should refer back to Chapter Three.

Objections from the Social Sciences

The sharpest objections to religious belief have come, however, not from the natural sciences but from the social sciences. Although challenges in a number of areas have emerged, probably the most significant have come from psychologist Sigmund Freud and sociologists Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx. We shall look at the sociologists first and then turn to psychology.

Challenges from sociology

Many sociologists view God as a product of what one might term the collective imagination of a society God is a "projection", not a real being. He is created by society, for social purposes, such as gaining greater control over individuals. Sociologists see belief in God as providing a focal point for the shared values of a society, particularly those values considered holy.

The particular forms of a sociological theory of religion, of course, reflect the characteristics of particular forms of sociological theory. French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, stressed the way in which religious belief contributes to the cohesion and harmonious functioning of a society. Karl Marx, on the other hand, seeing society as permeated by conflict and strife, viewed religious belief as related to class conflict. Marx is well known for his claim that "religion is the opium of the people" and he did stress how religion was used by the ruling class to justify the status quo and to

pacify the oppressed classes. However, Marx's theory is more complicated than is usually recognised, in that he also recognised religion as an implicit protest against the status quo, a longing for a better world that indirectly indicts the actual world.

Now just *how* do such theories constitute an objection to religious belief? On the surface it is hard to see. Both Durkheim and Marx have given us provocative theories about the social functions that religion fulfils but it is hard to see how any conclusion about the *truth* of religion can be drawn from this. It is difficult, for example, to find arguments in Marx against the reasonableness of belief in God. Marx seems just to assume answers to the significant philosophical questions about religious belief.

Perhaps the difficulty sociology poses for religious belief stems from the assumption that a sociological account gives a complete explanation of the origin of religious belief and this makes it possible to explain purported religious experiences and revelations in a purely naturalistic manner.

One must be careful here. It would be fallacious to infer that religious beliefs are false on the basis of an account of their sociological origins. Logicians call this fallacy the *genetic fallacy*. Strictly speaking, an account of the origins or genesis of a belief implies nothing about the truth or falsity of that belief. A belief that originates in strange or unusual circumstances may still be true: if evidence is offered for a belief, that evidence should be examined and not dismissed merely because of the belief's suspicious parentage. It would seem, then, that the evidence religious believers adduce for their faith should be taken seriously, regardless of whether the origins of those beliefs can be explained in sociological terms. If it turns out that no rational basis for such a belief exists, then a sociological account of why people continue to believe may be in order but such an account would again presuppose and not establish the unreasonableness of religious belief.

There are strong reasons for thinking that religious beliefs cannot be explained completely in sociological terms. Against Durkheim's theory of God as a symbolisation of the power and authority of society, H.H. Farmer has objected that such a theory accounts neither for the universal scope of the teachings of the

higher religions nor for the power religion has to criticise society in a prophetic manner.[1] Against Marx, one can note that, though religious beliefs have often been used to justify social oppression, they have also frequently provided the motivation for those who stood up against oppression – the Afghan *mujahideen* against the old Soviet army throughout the 1980s being a good example.

In any case, the fact that religion fulfils certain important functions in society is not surprising and should not be particularly threatening to the believer. Actually, the believer has a great deal to gain from sociological studies of religion. It is extremely important to understand the way social context shapes religion and the way religion influences society.

Freud and the challenge of psychology

A host of psychologists have theorised about the psychological origins and functions of religious belief but none has been so influential as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). In his book *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud attempted to explain both the origins of religious ideas and why they have continued to be popular.

Freud's theory, which overlaps sociological theories to some degree, views religious beliefs as fulfilling several deep psychological needs. First, religion helps allay our fears of the uncontrolled order of nature by personifying that order, or at least by viewing nature as under personal control. Second, religion helps us accept the costs of civilisation, which Freud sees as taking a toll on our natural biological urges. Religion both sanctifies the rules and institutions of society and promises future rewards that compensate for the pain these restrictions bring us. In our dealings with both nature and society, Freud sees religion as an expression of the longing for a father figure. As in the sociological theory, man creates God in his own image to satisfy his needs. For Freud, religion is an illusion, an illusion that produces some positive benefits to be sure, but one that places human beings in an immature, infantile

1. Farmer, H.H. (1943) *Towards Belief in God*, New York: Macmillan, pp. 145-67.

state.

Once more it appears that, even if Freud's account is accepted, it does not follow that religious belief is false. It is not surprising to the religious believer that religion fulfils important psychological functions. If Freud is right, then humans have a deep need to believe in God. But surely the existence of such a need does not show that God does not exist? Indeed, many religious believers would accept Freud's account of the importance of early childhood experiences and the father in developing beliefs about God. For them the human family is a divinely designed institution whose function may be, in part, to give humans some idea of what God is like and some inclination to believe in Him.

Strictly speaking, then, Freud's theories about the origin of religious belief are not objections to religious belief and to think otherwise is once more to commit the genetic fallacy. It is possible, however, to object to religious belief on the basis of Freud's ideas. (A similar objection can be generated from sociological theories.) One cannot infer the falsity of a belief on the basis of its origin without committing the genetic fallacy. The psychological origins or functions of a belief may, however, provide one with negative evidence if one also has some additional information about those origins. A particular belief held for particular psychological reasons may still be true but if it is known that beliefs held for that kind of reason are usually or generally false, then one has some evidence that the belief in question is false as well.

A Freudian might reason as follows: Religious beliefs are held solely to satisfy deep psychological needs. Beliefs that are held solely to satisfy deep psychological needs are usually false. Therefore religious beliefs are probably false.

This argument does not seem particularly strong as both premises are open to question. Religious beliefs do satisfy deep psychological needs but it is hard to see how one could establish that this is their sole basis. Certainly one could not do so without a careful examination of the evidence given in favour of religious belief, something notably lacking from Freud's account. Also it should be noted that religious belief is not always comforting or psychologically reassuring. Many people find religious ideas

unsettling and challenging.

The second premise seems even more questionable. People have deep psychological needs to believe in the reality and constancy of the physical world and the reliability of experience as a guide to the future. It would be absurd to question these beliefs because of this psychological fact, even though philosophers in fact find it difficult to justify these beliefs.

The kind of reductionism that characterises many psychological and sociological accounts of religious beliefs is actually a two-edged sword. Sociologists of knowledge can give accounts of the social origins of atheistic beliefs as well as religious beliefs. If believers sometimes show a deep psychological need to believe in God, non-believers sometimes show an equally deep psychological need to reject any authority over them and to assert themselves as their own lords and masters.

This takes us now into the final chapter where we discuss the impact of religious pluralism and personal faith at the beginning of this new century.

Chapter 7
God Revisited: Issues of Belief and Identity in the Twenty-First Century

"It all depends on where you are,
It all depends on when you are,
It all depends on what you feel,
It all depends on how you feel
It all depends on how you're raised
It all depends on what is praised,
What's right today is wrong tomorrow,
Joy in France, in England sorrow,
It all depends on point of view,
Australia or Timbuctoo,
In Rome do as the Romans do.
If tastes just happen to agree.
Then you have morality
But where there are conflicting trends,
It all depends, it all depends .."[1]

Our contemporary religious situation differs markedly from that faced by people a few hundred years ago. In Europe prior to the Reformation, the idea that one was faced with a plurality of religious beliefs from which one had to choose was foreign to the great majority of people. Religious beliefs were passed down from generation to generation. Certainly individuals may have had questions and doubts and certainly people were faced with choices as to how to interpret and apply what was passed down to them but those doubts and choices still presupposed a certain framework that could be taken for granted.

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1. Abraham Edel, *Ethical Judgement: The Use of Science in Ethics*, 1955, p. 16.

At the beginning of this new century, few people enjoy such a situation. Daily contacts through education and, perhaps most powerfully, through mass media, bring home to us the existence of radically different religious options. For example, Muslims face not only the in-house disagreements with other Muslims that have proliferated since the demise of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the seventh century but also many other world religions, as well as the secular mentality that opts for no overt religious belief at all. In such a situation, hardly anyone is content to believe what they believe simply because it was passed on to them by their parents or local mosque. Increasingly young people in the twenty-first century are troubled by whether their faith is a mere provincial bias or historical accident. They want to know whether they have grounds for thinking their belief to be genuinely true.

Philosophy of religion, as a no-holds-barred critical dialogue, is thus a crucial endeavour in today's world. But it is not without risk, since the outcome of such a dialogue may be merely increased doubt and confusion. As the great Muslim philosopher, al-Biruni (d. 1198) pointed out, philosophical thinking is not appropriate for all minds. Indeed, this book itself could serve as an illustration of the continuing debate among philosophers about the reasonableness of belief in God, the problem of evil, and the interpretation and meaningfulness of religious language. A crucial cluster of questions emerges as we deal with religious commitment in a pluralistic world. In a world such as ours, can a person commit himself or herself decisively to a particular set of religious beliefs? Should a person do so? Are such commitments reasonable?

The first question is largely a psychological and sociological one, and the answer seems to be yes, at least for many people. Though a larger number of agnostics may exist now than in previous eras, great numbers of people still adhere firmly to religious positions. Moreover, there continue to be instances of conversion where people who once had no faith come to believe or acquire a new faith. One must include in the group of "committed people" those who are committed atheists as well as religious believers. The label "secular man" can cover many types of individuals, from the person who scarcely gives religion a thought to the "evangelis-

tic atheist" who is committed to getting people to abandon their "superstitions" and embrace an atheistic creed.

The question of most interest to the philosopher, however, is not whether it is psychologically possible to be religiously committed, positively or negatively, but whether such commitments are reasonable. In the remainder of this chapter we shall pursue this question, first in general terms, and then with reference to the plurality of world religions with their competing truth-claims.

Faith and Subjectivity

The student who enters the critical dialogue we have called philosophy of religion may initially hope that rational reflection will eliminate the pluralism of competing perspectives. Such a hope, however, seems doomed to disappointment. It appears rather that the disagreements that are present among people in general reappear among philosophers.

Why does such disagreement continue to exist? There are doubtless many reasons. One important one, which we shall explore later, is that religious beliefs impinge directly on the way a person should live. To accept or reject a religion is to accept or reject a whole way of life and such decisions always involve the emotions as much as the intellect. It is not surprising that people who do not want to live as Muslims, for instance, and who want Islam to be false, should find reasons for justifying their beliefs.

A second reason for disappointment among philosophers of religion has to do with the subjective commitments, the "gut-convictions" that philosophers as human beings bring to their analyses of the arguments. In our examination of the arguments for and against religious belief, we stumbled on this factor again and again. Ultimately, whether an argument is judged sound depends on the truth of its premises. In many cases, a key premise is claimed to be reasonable or plausible by one individual, while another finds that premise doubtful at best.

The ontological argument, for example, seems sound if it is granted that it is reasonable to accept the claim that "God's existence is possible". The cosmological argument will be judged

sound if one accepts as sound the principle of sufficient reason, especially if one interprets the experience of cosmic wonder as evidence of the contingency of the natural world. The teleological argument will be judged sound if one interprets certain phenomena in the natural world as examples of beneficial order. Is the design we see around us genuine or merely apparent? The moral argument will be judged compelling if certain views about the nature of morality are accepted.

On the other side, the argument from evil against God's existence requires a person to judge whether he knows the evil in the world to be utterly pointless or whether his grounds for believing in its pointlessness are superior to his grounds for believing in a good God. Similar comments could be made about the arguments concerning the possibility of miracles, revelation claims and the analysis of religious experience.

In looking at the "objective" arguments, pro and con, it seems as if we are continually thrust back to personal, subjective judgements – to that moment where an individual simply says, "This has the ring of truth". As a result some have concluded that such rational reflection is of little value. In the end does it not all boil down to a "leap of faith", a blind decision unsupported by reason?

We must begin by noting that if one wishes to speak of leaps of faith, the religious believer is not the only one who does the leaping. The basic convictions that shape the conclusions of the atheist in these matters are equally subjective.

The leap-of-faith metaphor, however, is misleading in several respects. The metaphor conjures up an image of a person who simply makes an arbitrary choice to believe or not to believe. But it does not seem possible in normal cases to simply decide to believe something. We can only believe what seems true to us, because a belief is a belief that something is true. No matter how hard I try, I cannot make myself believe that pornography on the Internet does not exist, regardless of how comforting such a belief might be.

It is true that faith plays a key role in the judgements we ultimately make about religious questions. But what the leap-of-faith image misses is that the faith that is crucial is not, for the most part, faith that a person can simply manufacture by a momentary

act of will. The faith that shapes the individual's judgements is rather a faith that the individual already possesses. This faith consists of the basic convictions, attitudes and values that the person brings to his reflection on the religious situation. Hence, if one is to talk of faith in connection with the judgements one makes about religious matters, it is crucial to see this faith as a set of long-term qualities of whole persons, not as a momentary act of will.

Can Faith be Reasonable?

The existence of contrasting faiths in different people accounts for a good deal of the disagreements in religion. That faith plays such a crucial role in religious judgements troubles many people. Even if faith is not seen as an arbitrary blind leap, it still seems to undermine the claims of religious believers to *know* religious truths.

Working behind this anxiety is the strong foundationalist epistemology that we described as neutralism in Chapter One. If my judgement that a set of religious beliefs is true is partly grounded in faith convictions that are not shared by everyone, then it seems to many that such a judgement cannot be objectively certain. Is commitment reasonable in such a case? Can such a belief really amount to knowledge?

These questions raise fundamental epistemological issues about the nature of knowledge and justification. A full treatment of them would require a fully worked-out epistemology.[1] Here we can do no more than sketch the perspective on them that seems most reasonable.

The foundationalist ideal in epistemology is "objective certainty": it seems to the foundationalist that our knowledge must be based on a foundation that is so certain as to be acceptable to any sane, reasonable person. A reasonable person is, therefore, one who avoids commitment in cases where the commitment cannot

1. See Wolfe, D. (1982) *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, Intervarsity Press, for a very good introduction to epistemology.

be objectively guaranteed. Reason and faith are, therefore, seen as mutually hostile. Someone who relies on personal faith commitments is being unreasonable because reason demands that an individual put aside all prejudices, preconceptions and presuppositions.

The foundationalist ideal takes many forms. In its *empiricist* form it demands that we rely solely on "objective facts" in determining our beliefs. In its *rationalist* form it asks that we begin with basic premises that are self-evident to reason. In all its forms, foundationalism is an attempt to eliminate subjectivity – and risk – from the knowing process. To use John Dewey's phrase, it is "a quest for certainty". It wants, however, not merely certainty but an *objective* certainty in which the individual makes no risky commitments as an individual.

If foundationalism is a valid epistemological ideal, then I think one would have to admit that religious knowledge in the foundationalist sense of the term, whether positive or negative, is not really possible. The subjective element in such judgements seems ineradicable, at least in this life. But is foundationalism a valid ideal?

Philosophically, foundationalism has come under strong attack. Almost no one would today defend it in the strong version sketched above, though there may be some weaker versions that are still tenable. Rationalists have been thrown on hard times by the difficulty of finding enough self-evident truths to be a basis for knowledge. Empiricists have been embarrassed by the increasing recognition that the "hard facts" of experience are not always so hard. What one observes is strangely shaped by prior expectations, and experience seems to be heavily influenced by the conceptual framework of the experiencer. A further problem for the empiricist concerns getting from the "facts" to general theories that seem to be "undetermined" by those facts.[1]

Perhaps a more straightforward way of deciding the viability of foundationalism is to see whether it is an ideal we regard as valid in fields other than religion. Once more, foundationalism seems to

1. For an excellent sketch of the problems that beset foundationalism, see Wolterstorff, N. (1976), *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, esp. pp. 24-5.

be in trouble. In everyday life, individuals make countless judgements they regard as reasonable but which cannot be justified on foundationalist grounds. Consider, for instance, the following example.

I meet a new individual at school. After a few minutes' conversation I form an opinion of the person as a likeable, trustworthy man, and I invite him to my home to pursue a possible friendship. As the friendship grows, my confidence in the character of my friend becomes stronger and stronger. If I could articulate the grounds for such a judgement, which may not even be possible, I should discover that these grounds rest heavily on the faith assumptions I brought to the relationship. At each stage of the relationship I make interpretive judgements that are hardly infallible and which someone who approached the relationship with a different set of expectations and attitudes might not take. Nevertheless I am confident of my judgements. I do not claim they are infallible; it is logically conceivable that my new friend is a con artist who will eventually be my undoing. But I am confident this will not be the case, for I believe in my friend.

This example is a particularly apt one for religious knowledge, since interpersonal knowledge among humans shows many features of religious knowledge. But the example is not unique. The overwhelming majority of our everyday beliefs rest on interpretive judgements that incorporate a personal element.

Nor is such faith present only in everyday life. As was briefly noted in Chapter One, philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn have argued that faith commitments play a positive role even in the sciences.[1] In becoming a scientist, an individual becomes a part of a scientific community that is defined by the shared values, attitudes and basic assumptions of its members. These shared commitments are embodied not only in theories but in the life and practice of the community and they are acquired not only through overt instruction but by the individual's coming to share in that communal form of life.

The foundationalist ideal does not seem then to be either realistic or desirable in areas of life other than religion. There seems

1. Kuhn, T.S. (1963), *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, New York: Harper & Row.

little reason therefore to impose it on religion, where, it would seem, faith surely has a legitimate role to play in human life if it has such a role anywhere. With the abandonment of the foundationalist ideal, the way seems open for developing a view of reason that will make it possible to see faith and reason as potential allies instead of competitors.

Interpretive Judgements

Foundationalism appears attractive to many because they fear that its denial will open the floodgates to superstition and nonsense. The choice they see is one between objective certainty and a blind leap of faith, the latter meaning that "anything goes".

One way of looking at the foundationalist ideal is as a quest for an "algorithm" to decide religious questions. An algorithm is a decision procedure in mathematics which, when followed correctly, is guaranteed to lead to a solution of a problem. A finite number of steps that can be followed by anyone is the ideal. I question whether a "religious algorithm" would even be desirable. What must be attacked head-on, however, is the false disjunction of either an algorithm or an irrational leap. There is a great deal of space between these two extremes and reasonable judgements can be made in a great many areas of human life, even though algorithmic decision procedures are lacking. A key element in such areas is the concept of an *interpretive judgement*.

In his excellent book *The Justification of Religious Belief*, Basil Mitchell gives several examples of reason at work in non-algorithmic areas.[1] One is the area of historical scholarship. Historians often disagree about the causes of a particular event or its meaning. Though rival historians may agree on many facts, they often disagree about how these facts should be interpreted and their significance evaluated.

Another excellent example is the field of literary criticism. Literary scholars often disagree about the meaning of a poem. Is a

1. Mitchell B. (1981), *The Justification of Religious Belief*; Oxford University Press, particularly pp. 45-57.

particular line to be regarded as irony, satire or straightforward praise?

In both of these areas "objective" factors play an important role. Rival historians search for facts that will support their own theories and they interpret the facts in accordance with their overall theory. Rival critics look for features of the poem that support their interpretation as well as other sorts of data, such as known facts about the author's attitudes. Such disagreements may not in the end be objectively resolvable to the satisfaction of all parties. However, this does not mean that reason has no role to play in such matters. We can still distinguish between interpretations that are reasonable and those that are preposterous. In recognising the role of interpretation and the lack of an algorithm, the floodgates to nonsense have not been thrown open.

These examples are instructive for the philosophy of religion, for interpretation will play a key role in defending or attacking religious beliefs as well. The proponent of the cosmological argument interprets the experience of cosmic wonder differently from his opponent. The proponent of the moral argument interprets morality differently from his opponent. The religious individual who perceives God through a revelatory book interprets his experience very differently from the non-religious person.

Indeed, it is very likely that the experiences themselves differ. For in speaking of interpretation, I do not mean to refer only, or even mainly, to a consciously articulated process that follows experience but also to those interpretive features that are already present in experience. We do not usually simply see or hear; we see something as something and hear something as something.

When would we say that an interpretive judgement is reasonable? Not, I submit, when it is the result of a presupposition less, neutral standpoint. For such a "neutral" reader could not even begin to read the piece in question. Rather an *interpretive judgement is reasonable when it can survive the process of critical testing.* A reasonable interpretation is one that accounts for the facts, suggests new insights, illuminates meaningful patterns and does so better than its rival.

In this process, the subjective preferences the individual brings to the process are more than an unavoidable nuisance; faith is part of what makes the whole business possible.

When tested, these subjective preferences cease to be merely subjective preferences. For the criteria used in testing them are not arbitrary but are implicitly recognised as valid by all parties to the controversy. These criteria are factors such as the following:

(1) *Logical consistency*. Does the system of beliefs contradict itself?
(2) *Coherence*. This is more than bare logical consistency, which is simply the absence of contradiction. Coherence is a positive harmony, a fitting together of beliefs into an organic whole.
(3) *Factual adequacy*. Does the belief system account for all the facts? How well does it do so?
(4) *Intellectual fertility*. Does a belief system give rise to new discoveries and insights, suggest new illuminating patterns, call one's attention to unnoticed dimensions of experience?

The case for or against a set of religious beliefs will necessarily appeal to those kinds of criteria. Because such criteria often have to be applied to a belief system as a whole, it seems to me that the justification for a set of religious beliefs is unlikely to consist of a single, linear argument, but of what Mitchell has called a cumulative case.

Mitchell uses as an illustration for a cumulative case, a hypothetical case of two explorers who stumble on a large depression in the ground.[1] One takes the hole to be the result of purposeful intelligence; the other does not. Somewhat later, they discover other similar depressions. The first person thinks he sees a pattern in the relations between the holes; to the other party they are just ordinary holes. Later still, they find in a cave some manuscripts, faint and obscure. The first explorer excitedly claims to have a document that in some way shows the design and function of the holes. To the second party the document is cryptic and it is not clear that it has anything to do with the holes in question.

1. Ibid. pp 39-45.

Mitchell means his story to be a parable of the argument between the religious believer and the unbeliever. The large hold corresponds to the experience of finitude and contingency which generates the cosmic argument. The smaller holes correspond to the considerations that fuel such arguments as the teleological and moral arguments, as well as the evidence from religious experience. The documents found in the cave correspond to alleged special revelations, in which God has perhaps spelled out the meaning of things in more detail. The case the believer wants to make will not be based on any one of the several factors taken in isolation. Each individual piece of evidence involves an element of interpretation and the force of the overall case depends both on its ability to account for each part and on its ability to show meaningful, coherent patterns among the parts.

A judgement that reflects the personal faith of the judges can still be a reasonable one, provided the individual is willing to put his convictions to the test.

Can Faith be Certain?

Let us assume that a cumulative case, relying at certain points on interpretive judgements, can be constructed for a set of religious beliefs. Such a case would provide a rational basis for belief, if one is willing to admit the existence of a non-algorithmic type of rationality. A sceptic might still object at this point that such a case could never really justify a genuine religious faith. One of the marks of a genuine religious commitment is that such commitments have an unconditional, decisive character. Such commitments are total commitments. But the evidence underlying religious belief would seem to fall short of absolute certainty. To the sceptic this means that a reasonable commitment to religious belief must always be tentative in nature. In support of this he could cite our own contention in the previous section that an openness to critical testing and revision in the light of new evidence is essential, if a faith commitment is to be reasonable.

The sceptic's view, at this point, presupposes what some have called an ethics of belief. In this case, the ethical principle seems to

be that firmness of belief ought always to be proportionate to the quality of the evidence for the belief. Even if we admit the reasonableness of belief on the basis of evidence that is less than algorithmic, surely the degree of belief ought to reflect the degree of evidence, says the sceptic.

To respond to the sceptic's charge here, we must give a more careful analysis of the nature of religious belief and the nature of belief generally. H. Price, in his classical study *Belief*, distinguishes two major types of theories of belief.[1] According to one view, a belief is a mental act, an occurrence in which the mind considers a proposition and performs the act of "assenting" to it. According to the second theory, which we might like to call the behavioural-disposition theory, a belief is a tendency or disposition to act or behave in certain ways under certain conditions. Thus, if I believe that I reside in the city of London, that does not mean I am continually, consciously, considering that proposition. Rather the belief consists in hypothetical facts about my behaviour like these: If I am asked what city I reside in, I will reply, "London"; if I stop at a petrol station and ask for a map to help me find a nearby location, I will ask for a map of London.

Price concludes that neither view is completely adequate alone. The mental-assent view does not recognise the way in which beliefs express themselves in action and it cannot explain the fact that I continue to believe things of which I am not at the moment consciously thinking. The behavioural-disposition view ignores the reality of mental acts of assent and has difficulty specifying in a non-circular way what acts and dispositions a belief consists in. Ultimately, one must say, "A person who believes proposition P will perform those acts that a person who believes P will perform." Price concludes that a combined theory is best, a theory that recognises the "dispositional" character of belief but regards beliefs as consisting not merely in being disposed to perform overt actions but also to perform those mental acts of belief that Price terms "assentings".

Price's conclusion provides a good starting place for understanding religious belief as well. True religious belief cannot be

1. Price, H.H. (1969) *Belief*; New York: Humanities Press. Price calls these two theories the "occurrence analysis" and the "dispositional analysis".

reduced simply to believing in a certain way. To believe that God is merciful is not *simply* to act in a merciful manner. Rather the religious believer acts in a merciful manner partly because he believes in God. He mentally assents to propositions like "God is real", "God is merciful", and "God wants me to love others". On the other hand, genuine religious belief clearly does not consist merely in mental acts of assent either. In Islam, for example, true faith must make, a difference to the believer's life; merely to assent to God's existence is surely not enough:

> *"Say: All my prayer and my sacrifices, my living and my dying, are for Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. He has no partner and I am the first of those to submit to Him"*[1]

It is not that the religious believer does not assent to certain propositions. It is rather that the very nature of those propositions is such that the person who merely assents to them intellectually shows thereby that in one important sense he/she does not believe them. Religious beliefs, even more than beliefs generally, have an essentially *prescriptive* role. Their very being, one might say, consists in their being more than intellectual beliefs. If they are genuine, they express themselves in action.

This characteristic of religious beliefs has great implications for the problem posed by the "proportionality principle" advocated by some as part of the ethics of belief. If religious beliefs consisted solely of mental "acts of assent", then it would make sense to say that such beliefs should be proportionate to the evidence and that therefore such beliefs could not possess an "unconditional" character unless the evidence is absolutely unconditional. If religious beliefs consist mainly of dispositions to perform certain actions, however, with even the propositions to which one mentally assents having prescriptive implications for one's total life, this may not be correct. The reason for this is that man's actions do not admit of degrees; they have an absolute character in the sense that one either does the action or does not.

Furthermore, many actions, if done at all, must be done in an enthusiastic, wholehearted manner. A person suffering from

1.Qur'an 6:162-3.

depression might have a choice between consulting a psychoanalyst or going to see a behavioural therapist. After reviewing the evidence as to their effectiveness, he/I/she makes a choice to see one or the other. If he actually embarks on a programme of therapy, it is reasonable for him to give it his best shot and participate wholeheartedly in the programme, even if he has no proof it will help him. He knows that a timid, half-hearted commitment will not give the programme of therapy a fair trial. In a sense, a wholehearted commitment, far from precluding an honest test of a risky commitment, is a condition for such a test.

An even clearer illustration might be the choice to marry. A woman who is considering offers of marriage from different men has no algorithm for determining which choice is "right" for her. If she decides to marry, however, it would be the height of foolishness to refrain from committing herself wholeheartedly to the marriage on the grounds that her evidence that her husband is truly loving, kind and brave is not absolutely compelling to everyone.

Religious faith would seem to be similar: indeed, it is the nature of true religious belief that it be part of a way of life. Committing oneself to such a way of life seems to be the sort of thing that must be done in an all-or-nothing, unconditional manner, if it is to be done at all, even if the evidence for the commitment is a matter of degree.

> "*All that is on earth will perish;*
> *But will abide (forever) the Face of thy Lord –*
> *full of Majesty, Bounty and Honour.*"[1]

Our argument that it may be reasonable to hold decisively a belief for which there is good but not absolutely compelling evidence, does not, of course, imply that all religious beliefs must be held in this unconditional manner. Most religious believers do hold some of their beliefs in a tentative manner, recognising them as less central to their faith than others. A Muslim's belief that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the recipient of

1.Qur'an 55:26-7.

divine revelation (the Qur'an) may be more firmly held than any particular theory as to how the Qur'an was put together.

Can Religious Faith be Tested?

If one admits that a faith based on less-than-algorithmic evidence can nonetheless be "total" or decisive in character, then the opposite problem might seem to appear. Earlier we argued that a reasonable faith must be open to initial testing. But can a person who is whole-heartedly committed to a faith genuinely and honestly evaluate that faith?

It may seem that to test one's belief one would have to be able to doubt it; and doubt seems incompatible with robust faith. There are, however, different kinds of doubt. Let us distinguish logical doubt from existential doubt. Logical doubt is a willingness to consider imaginatively the possibility that one's own convictions are mistaken by honestly considering the new evidence and comparing one's case with other possible cumulative cases. Existential doubt is a positive belief that one's own position is seriously flawed or that it is quite possibly wrong.

A certain amount of existential doubt seems acceptable and even normal in a religious life. The great scholars and imams (Al-Ghazzali, for instance) are not uniformly people who were never troubled by doubt but people who were able to deal with their doubts and act decisively in spite of them. A person willing to sacrifice his life for his faith would by no means have a faith that is somehow inferior or less than decisive, even if that person at times struggled with existential doubt. We must remember that religious beliefs are primarily dispositions to action. The test as to whether a person is truly a believer is not whether a person assents in a doubt-free manner to religious propositions. The true test is whether the person is willing to act on those beliefs.

Existential doubt can then coexist with religious faith. If existential doubt becomes too great or too frequent, however, faith might be crippled or cease to exist altogether. But whatever tension may be present between faith and existential doubt, there is no necessary tension between faith and logical doubt. Inherent in

my belief that things are a particular way is an understanding of how things could be different. If I am genuinely convinced that my belief is true, I will not shrink from examining rival views. To the degree that I am certain and confident, I will welcome testing. A faith that evades critical questions is a faith that lacks confidence, that is not truly assured it has found truth. Paradoxical as it may sound, confidence in one's convictions may make it possible to put those convictions to serious test. A recognition of the logical possibility that one could be mistaken is not a reason to believe that one actually is mistaken. Similarly, an imaginative ability to empathise with a rival position, so as to compare it with one's own, does not mean that one is actually doubting one's belief existentially.

This is not to say that religious believers will, or should, continually seek out objections to their faith. Belief is, after all, to be lived. If we spent all our time critically reflecting on our faith, we would have no time to live out that faith. And religious faith is tested in part by the very process of living it out. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for religious believers, as they have the intellectual ability and opportunity, to spend some time reflecting on their faith and its reasonableness.

An Anatomy of Faith

In the preceding discussion the term "faith" has been used in a variety of senses. We have used it to refer to the assumptions, convictions and attitudes the believer brings to the evidence for and against religious truth.

We have also used the term to refer to the commitment which is in some respects the outcome of this reflection. We have used "faith" to refer to the subjective preferences of people generally and to refer to the specific kind of commitment involved in being a religious believer.

What then is Faith?

Faith is all of these, though this must not be taken as implying that there are no significant differences between the various kinds of faith. In a sense, every person has "faith": everyone has deep-rooted assumptions, convictions and attitudes that colour what counts as evidence for him and how that evidence is interpreted. This is the kind of faith one brings to the evidence. In so far as beliefs are reflected in action, and people must make choices, everyone also has faith in the sense of commitments that may or may not be informed by rational reflection.

In the on-going life of an actual person, these are simply two different moments in what might be called the faith dimension of life. The faith we bring to our reflection embodies previous commitments and the commitment that is the outcome of reflection is the faith we bring to our future reflection. Faith can legitimately be thought of as both prior conviction and commitment. This movement from prior conviction through rational reflection to commitment cannot be understood merely as a temporally distinct process either. For the having of convictions, the reflecting and the committing interpenetrate each other in the most complex fashion.

This general structure of faith as the personal commitment that both informs and is in turn shaped by reflection is common to both the religious believer and non-believer. Both have faith in both of these senses. This does not, however, imply that religious faith has nothing distinctive about it. The content itself makes a tremendous difference. The particular kinds of attitudes, convictions and commitments that permeate the life of a genuine religious believer differ radically from the attitudes, convictions and commitments that permeate the life of a consistent, clear-headed unbeliever.

Furthermore, this content may correspond to equally momentous differences in the way the person relates to that content. As we noted above, religious beliefs have an essentially prescriptive role; they are not truly believed if the belief is merely intellectual and makes no difference in the believer's life. Furthermore, again as noted above, the special character of religious belief demands

an equally strong commitment on the part of the individual. The religious believer cannot regard his faith merely as a hypothesis to which he has a certain degree of commitment. The commitment must be decisive and total. The believer claims that this commitment is not a mere "opinion"; it is a conviction that he/she feels certain is true, a certainty that both stems from and underlies the existential commitment he/she has made.

It is true, in one sense, that "everyone has faith" but there is a special kind of faith that is uniquely religious. Even here, however, there is a plurality. Different religions engender different kinds of religious faith. There is therefore a distinctly Islamic kind of faith, though the task of describing that faith in its details falls outside the general project of the philosophy of religion. The existence of this pluralism raises once more the question of commitment: How does one choose?

Could One Religion be True?

The pluralism that faces the contemporary believer is most dramatically evident in the existence of competing religions. Even if we leave out secular humanism, we still have Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism as active faiths with millions of adherents. Is it reasonable to commit oneself to just one of these religions? Could one religion contain the final truth?

An increasing number of people feel, in the twenty-first century, that the answer is "no" for at least two reasons. First, there is the problem of tolerance and arrogance. Is it not intolerant of other faiths to claim that their own religion contains the final truth? And is not such a claim arrogant? Missionary activity and proselytising should be replaced by dialogue and mutual respect, say many religious thinkers. Second, the view that one religion contains the final truth seems provincial. Surely God has not limited His revelation to one geographical section or ethnic group.

Those who regard all religions as at least possibly true employ two different strategies. We will examine each in turn. The first option is exemplified in the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith of Harvard University. Smith says that we should stop thinking about

religious truth in propositional terms and recognise that religiously speaking it is personal lives that are true or false.[1] Smith tells of a follower of Islam he met in the Himalayas.[2] The man was selling fruit and had a primitive set of scales. There was no way of verifying the accuracy of the scales but the man's honesty was sustained by a verse of the Qur'an, "*Lo! He over all things is watching.*" Smith suggested that this verse in the Qur'an "became true" in the person's life. In a similar way, Smith says of Christianity that it "is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically: rather it can become true, if and as you and I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorise it".[3]

If Smith is right, then we do not have to ask, "Which religion is true?" They can all be true, in the sense that they all can give rise to "true lives". According to this view, to look at religions as offering competing theories is a mistake.

Smith's view contains a deep insight but the insight is accompanied by confusion. He is quite right to stress that religious truth must be personally appropriated. I agree that in one sense of the word "true" one might appropriately speak of a person's life being true. Furthermore, no strict, necessary correlation binds the objective truth of a proposition and the "truth" of the life of an adherent to that proposition. It is conceivable that a person might believe objectively correct religious truths, yet personally live "falsely" because of a lack of interiorisation of that truth. Furthermore, a person who believes objectively false propositions may still have some truth in his life, for it is possible for a person to be better than his theories.

None of this implies, however, that religions do not make competing truth-claims. It is possible for one religion to be objectively true in the sense that the major portion of its propositional claims are correct, while those of its competitors are false. Nor is this objective truth unimportant. If it is false that "Jesus is the son of

1.Smith, W.C. (1984), " A Human View of Truth", in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions*: Conflicting Truth-Claims, ed. John Hick, Westminster Press, pp. 20-44.

2. Smith, W.C., *Questions of Religious Truth*, pp.89-90; quoted in John Hick, "The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth", in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions*, p.146.

3. Smith, W.C., *Questions of Religious Truth*, p.68, quoted in Hick, *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions*, p. 145.

God" then in an important sense a believing Christian is deceived. Should he come to discover the objective falsehood of this proposition, this may affect the "truth" of his life.

The second strategy for eliminating the conflict between religions comes from John Hick. He differs from Smith in admitting that religions do make objective truth-claims and that these claims at least apparently conflict. Hick suggests, however, that the differences maybe merely apparent. His basic idea is that God "in Himself" is an infinite reality, "and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind".[1] Perhaps the apparently conflicting views the various religions have developed about God are like the apparently conflicting descriptions of an elephant produced by a group of blind people. The various religions all present "images of the divine, each expressing some aspect or range of aspects and yet none by itself fully and exhaustively correspond to the infinite nature of the ultimate reality".[2] The apparent differences are due to the differing interpretations humans have placed on their experience of the divine, which are due to the different cultural and historical circumstances that have conditioned the experiences.[3] Hick calls for a new dialogue between the world religions on this basis, a dialogue that will hopefully resolve their apparent disagreements.

Hick's approach has much appeal. It is indeed possible that the religious experiences of diverse cultures contain true insights about God and I heartily support Hick's call for dialogue among the world's religions. A person committed to a particular faith need not regard all other faiths as completely wrong. Indeed, there may be many points of similarity, as is obviously the case with the great monotheistic religions – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – for example.

I question, however, whether the disagreements between the world's religions can be resolved as easily as Hick suggests. First, Hick's proposal implies that we must become sceptics about God in the final analysis. We do not really know God as He is, for God

1. Hick, J. (1973), *God and the Universe of Faiths*, New York: St Martin's Press, p. 139.
2. Ibid. p. 140.
3. Ibid. p. 146.

as He is "transcends human thought". In what sense, then, are our human images true images of God? Is any image truer than any other? If it is equally correct to think of God as a being who is capable of answering prayers and performing miracles and as an impersonal reality with no will or self-consciousness, then what view of God would be incorrect? The term "God" here threatens to become so nebulous as to lose all sense.

Second, Hick's proposal is not quite what it seems. On the surface he seems to say that all religions could be true. But what about the "exclusive" claims made by various religions? Islam, for example, says that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the last messenger of God and the recipient – over a period of twenty-three years – of the Holy Qur'an. Salvation comes through implementing the Qur'anic injunctions and following the prophetic *Sunnah* (practice). How can such a claim be reconciled with Hindu and Buddhist views, which might admit – as Mahatma Gandhi did – Prophet Muhammad as a revealer of God and the Qur'an as a path to salvation but could never admit the Muslim claims? Hick appears to be proposing that believers modify their faith to make it compatible with other faiths.

Hick's proposal takes us to the basic issue of how one knows religious truth. Traditionally, most believers hold their convictions on the basis of their acceptance of a holy book as a special, authoritative revelation from God. If special, authoritative revelation is impossible, or if in fact one has never occurred, then something like Hick's view would be plausible. If, however, one holds that mankind's natural knowledge of God is inadequate, distorted by sin, and that a special revelation from God is required, if we are truly to know God, then Hick's proposal seems dubious. Hick is in effect assuming the essential ability of mankind to know God and be on good terms with Him. If one believes that assumption to be dubious, then Hick's proposal will also appear dubious.

It is important, however, to recognise that someone who chooses to believe in the Qur'an as especially authoritative has not necessarily rejected reason The questions whether a revelation could be authoritative and, if so, whether one has occurred can be rationally discussed. It is conceivable that reason might recognise that its ability to come to know God, operating within its natural

abilities, is severely limited, and might see the need and value of a special revelation. Furthermore, reason can and must evaluate rival candidates to be such a revelation.

If someone is committed to an exclusivist religion, does this mean he is intolerant or arrogant? I do not think so. True tolerance and respect require a recognition of genuine differences. Genuine dialogue likewise begins with a cordial admission of differences and a willingness to respect sincere disagreement.

A religious believer who is convinced that his faith is true is not necessary arrogant. He can, without giving up his convictions, admit his fallibility and appreciate the perspectives of others. If he is a Muslim and holds to his faith on the basis of special revelation, he cannot be arrogant, for he recognises that the knowledge he has of God is not the result of his own cleverness but is, in fact, made possible through his recognition of his own weakness. And if he feels compelled to share his faith with others, it may not be a sign of arrogant pride or imperialism but rather the result of a humble desire for others to know the truth.

"So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the faith:
(Establish) Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind:
No change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah: that is the standard Religion:
But most among mankind understand not."[1]

1. Qur'an 30:30.

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